

## Echoes of Power, Part I: Anger

### Summary:

Harry mysteriously disappeared at the age of six, and then benefited from years of tutoring by an old family friend. With the return of Voldemort, it is finally time for a fifteen-year-old, well-trained, sarcastic and somewhat cynical Harry to take up his place at Hogwarts. Life at Hogwarts, however, is not always what Harry anticipated. There, secrets are told, allies are discovered, and the journey to power begins. Completely AU.

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### Preface A/N to Echoes of Power at FanFiction-net:

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You may or may not have read this elsewhere. Chapters 1 through 20 were posted originally at SIYE, and all subsequent chapters are posting in multiple locations – but this remains a WIP. This version is a re-edited one, with some of the earlier terms (Americanisms) fixed, as well as some smoothing of rough transitions. If you have not previously read this work, I hope you enjoy it. If you have previously read this, please rest assured that no plot details are being changed in any way. The story framework simply will not allow such. A huge round of thanks to the full beta team working on this story.

That said, I wish to bring your attention to the fact that this is an AU story. It's very much an AU story. The characters have the same names, but not the same histories, as in JKR's canon. That means that if you can't handle the fact that all of the major characters are going to behave differently – for they now have different motivations, different histories, and different dreams – then you probably want to go read something else. Also, if you find you don't like what you're reading, it's quite simple: stop reading. Go read something else. I don't want to hear complaints about any shipping in the story, or how once-upon-a-time you read a story that had a good/bad/whatever

characterization of someone, and now you can't stand / always want to have some character in the story. Really. I don't care. This story will not change the plot because you ask me to, no matter how you ask.

So, if you can't handle it, go read something else. And before you decide to doubt my life experience or ability to write about some of the topics in this story, go read my profile page. If you can top that or at least come close to matching it, you're welcome to ask those questions. If you can't, save yourself the egg-on-face sensation.

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## Part I: Anger

### Chapter 1: Playing Nicely With Others

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1 September 1995

"Mind if we join you?" the gangly red-headed boy asked. The only occupant in the compartment – a black-haired boy in plain black robes – shrugged in reply. "Thanks!"

The peace and quiet of the compartment was then lost as the tall redhead was followed by a bushy-haired brunette and a slightly chubby boy of medium height with dark hair. Another redhead, this one a smaller girl, and a honey-blond girl brought up the rear, closing the door behind them. After a few moments of chatter and confusion as trunks and other things were stowed away, the two redheads and the brunette sat across from the black-haired boy while the blond girl and chubby boy sat beside him.

"Hi, I'm Ron Weasley, by the way!" the redhead said, extending his hand.

The dark-haired boy looked at the proffered hand for a moment, then reached out and shook it with a grip that clearly surprised the redhead.

Jerking a thumb at the girl sitting across from him, Ron said, "That's my sister, Ginny." He then pointed to the brunette beside him and said, "This is Hermione Granger. Try not to let her questions run you ragged." Everyone chuckled slightly at this, while Hermione shot Ron a dirty look. "That's Neville Longbottom and Hannah Abbot." The two sitting next to him nodded in turn.

The black-haired boy nodded to each of them in turn as they were introduced. "I'm Harry."

Hermione shot Ron another dirty look before turning back to Harry. "I didn't know Hogwarts took transfer students. Where are you from? What year are you in? We're all fifth years."

Harry gazed curiously at Ginny, then at Ron before asking, "Fraternal?"

While Ron and Ginny looked at Harry in confusion, Hermione laughed. "No, they're not twins. Ron's birthday is in early September like mine, but Ginny's is in mid-August. Hogwarts will only accept you if you're eleven years old before the first of September."

"Twins?" ask Ron. "What sort of barmy question is that? Do we look like twins? I'm a boy, for Merlin's sake, and she's a girl!"

Harry smirked at Ron and gestured toward Ginny. "Trust me, I realized that she's a girl. Now if you were one, you would've had to be one of the ugliest girls I've ever met."

Ginny let out a muffled chuckle while Neville and Hannah started laughing outright.

Hermione smacked Ron in the back of the head. "No, Ron! Fraternal twins! It's when two eggs are fertilized at the same time. Identical twins, like Fred and George, or Parvati and Padma, are the division of

one egg. Fraternal twins never look alike and frequently aren't the same sex."

Ron looked confused, as did Ginny and Neville. "What? Twins that don't look alike? Is that some kind of Muggle thing?"

It was Hermione's turn to look puzzled. "What do you mean? Have there never been fraternal... err, non-identical twins in a magical family before?"

Ginny shook her head.

"That's impossible! I'll have to ask Professor McGonagall about it. Surely it's happened at least once... unless the magic is why... but Muggles... Squibs...?" Hermione trailed off, muttering to herself about what the implications of magic itself causing identical twins might be.

Ginny looked back at Harry and asked, "Are you going to answer Hermione's questions?"

Harry winked at her. "Sorry, I don't know how to use magic to make twins. I just know how to make them the old-fashioned way."

Ginny glared at him while Hermione continued to stare into space; Hannah giggled. Neville merely shook his head as though in resignation.

Harry shrugged and ignored the reactions. "I've been, err, home-schooled, I suppose. I don't know what year I'll be in if it's based on ability. But if it's just based on age, then I'll be a fifth year too." Harry looked at Neville. "Do they test for natural gifts before choosing which class to put you in, or just let you find out as you go along?"

Neville shook his head. "I've never been tested, and I haven't heard about anyone else being tested. Have you been tested?"

Harry decided that that bit of information was definitely not getting out. "Err, no, I've just heard of it."

Hannah leaned back a bit before entering the conversation. "Why were you home-schooled? Everyone I know who got letters of acceptance to Hogwarts actually went to Hogwarts! Only the best students can attend! I know there are other schools, but they're a lot smaller and don't have Hogwarts' reputation."

"Oi! Home-schooled! That means no Quidditch!" exclaimed Ron with a horrified look. "That's just wrong!"

Harry just shrugged in response. "It's a pretty complicated story, and I'd rather not get into it. There were really good reasons for it at the time, reasons that have stopped being so valid recently, so... here I am." The abrupt termination to this line of inquiry seemed to put Hannah off but only seemed to perk Ron's and Ginny's interest.

"Ooooh," said Ginny. "You've got secrets... I can't wait to tell Fred and George. You'll be on your knees begging to confess before they get finished with you!"

Ron laughed at her, and motioned for Harry to come closer.

"Fred and George are our brothers. They prank anyone, anytime, anywhere, for any reason. And they pride themselves on finding out every secret..." Ron smirked at Harry before continuing. "If we were to just happen to let slip that you have major secrecy issues, well, it's not like we would be doing anything to you, is it?"

Harry chuckled. "So, the Weasleys like to ferret out deep dark secrets, do they? You do know that the ferret is part of the weasel family?" Most of the group laughed. "You're welcome to tell Fred and George. Make sure to mention to them that if they want to pull pranks, I'm certainly not going to take it lying down - I will retaliate and escalate."

"Harry, Harry... you have no absolutely idea what you're getting into, here." Neville shook his head mournfully. "I've been pranked by them ever since I started at Hogwarts. What shall we put on your gravestone? 'Here lies Harry, he thought he could prank the Weasleys'! It doesn't sound too good to me. What's your last name, by the way?"

The conversation stopped abruptly when the sliding door to the compartment was thrown open after the merest suggestion of a knock. A pale blonde boy with pointed features stood in the doorway.

“So, is it true? My father said that Harry Potter would finally be on the train to Hogwarts, and this is the last compartment to check. That would be you, I suppose?” the boy asked, looking directly at Harry after glancing around at the others.

Harry merely quirked one eyebrow, inviting further information. Everyone else in the compartment just stared in shock, either at the blonde or at Harry.

The blonde boy smiled broadly, strongly implying somehow that he knew that Harry had yet to identify himself to the others. This seemed to further shock the other students who must have thought the blonde incapable of anything but sneering. “I’m Malfoy. Draco Malfoy. I’d like to help you adjust to the Wizarding world. After all, there are those of us with a lot more history in the Wizarding world than some others I could mention, and I’d like to help you learn about all the traditions and important things. Interested?”

The blonde boy may have been smiling and speaking politely, but Harry could feel a certain undercurrent in his statements. Looking Malfoy right in the eye, he asked, “And how could what you offer be any better than just reading the introduction to *A Modern Guide for Life in Magical Europe*?”

Hermione shot Harry a funny look, but Harry was not about to admit to Malfoy that he had just made up the book title on the spot.

Malfoy smirked in a superior manner. “That old book? Surely you realize that the author had far less knowledge than many of the old families possess. So you can see that it would be better for you to learn the truth about things in person. After all, very few families have as rich and as glorious a history to draw on as the Malfoys.” His smug expression clearly indicated that only a complete idiot would refuse such unrivalled generosity. Harry just laughed under his breath at Malfoy’s implication that he had read a fictitious book.

Malfoy then gestured to the two hulking boys behind him. "My friends, Crabbe and Goyle. They're also from proud families with a long and noble tradition."

Harry studied the way the two boys positioned themselves and realized they were less friends and more muscle to be applied as directed. The two boys eyed Harry up and down before nodding briefly at him. Harry wondered if they were atypical in the magical world and actually knew how to fight as opposed to just looking imposing. Most of the magical people whom he had encountered in, or out of, fights had been completely hopeless when faced with someone who knew what they were doing.

Harry looked back at Malfoy. "Let me see if I understand what you're saying. I'll sum up, shall I?" The blonde gave a decisive nod, as though commanding a particularly obedient dog. Harry gave him a bland smile. The others in the compartment looked quite worried that Harry was smiling, as it probably seemed very likely to them that he would follow Malfoy out. After all, Harry had never once smiled like that with any of them.

"You, Draco Malfoy, are offering to tutor me in the history and customs of the Wizarding world, to make sure I don't do something against one of your taboos." Harry paused while the blonde nodded.

"You, Draco, son of a Death Eater, proponent of racism and bigotry, will offer to be my best mate in order to report back to your Death Eater father and incompetent half-blood lord and master what I'm doing and am capable of." Malfoy started turning red as Crabbe and Goyle moved to stand next to their brain rather than behind him.

"You, slime ball extraordinaire, are suggesting that those of less than so-called pureblood and substantial wealth are barely worthy of being peasants in your new order. So you're also offering to try and brainwash me into your tripe-laden beliefs. I believe, after no reflection at all, that I'd have to say that's a big no in reply."

Turning away from Malfoy, who had become almost Weasley-haired-red in his embarrassment and anger, Harry looked at Ron and continued their conversation as though they had not been rudely

interrupted. "So, what were you saying about Quidditch, Ron?" Ron just continued to stare at Harry, slack-jawed in amazement.

Malfoy hissed vehemently and ground out through gritted teeth, "You'll meet the same end as your parents, Potter. Your days are numbered. Just remember that I offered you the chance to be truly great."

Harry merely laughed at the blonde and dismissed him with the merest flick of his hand. "Run along now, Draco dear. You're about as big a threat as a well-bred miniature poodle, and your efforts at intimidation are pretty pathetic – and that is erring on the side of generosity."

This proved to be too much for Malfoy, who gestured sharply at Crabbe and Goyle. The two large boys immediately stepped in front of him and started to reach out for Harry.

Moving faster than anyone else in the compartment, Harry shot to his feet, forcing the two boys to stop and refocus on his new location.

"If any of you try to touch me or use magic on me, I am publicly warning you – I will treat you as life-threatening attackers and respond accordingly. So back off." The cold and menacing tone of his voice would have given any reasonably sane person pause, but it just seemed to bounce off the trio of Death Eater sympathisers.

Malfoy sneered. "Time for a bit of a lesson in humility, Potter."

Crabbe and Goyle each took one step forward to crowd Harry, but even before Ron, Ginny or Neville could reach for their wands, Harry exploded into action.

His right foot shot forward and around, slamming into Goyle's jaw. The pretend thug stumbled backward, straight into Malfoy. As Crabbe threw a punch, Harry deflected it and trapped it in his own right hand, forcibly drawing the arm to full extension. Harry's left forearm came down in a hammer blow and slammed through the boy's elbow, pushing it far beyond mere hyperextension. Crabbe's scream of pain



as he fell was silenced as Harry's left knee slammed into the back of his head.

Malfoy pushed Goyle off of him and both boys got to their feet while Harry was turning to continue the attack, leaving Crabbe to fall unconscious. Malfoy was just drawing his wand as Harry took on the other thug mockery. With a planted left foot and locked hips, his right heel shot out to the centre of Goyle's face with a powerful thrust. The sickening crunch was accompanied by a bright scarlet spray of blood from where his nose and teeth had once been. While Goyle fell backward, bouncing off the wall, Malfoy's arm shot forward as he screamed, "Diffindo!"

Harry spun slightly to Malfoy's left side as his left arm knocked Malfoy's wand hand toward the ceiling. The Slicing Curse cut a deep trench through the ceiling of the compartment. Harry's right palm seized Malfoy's chin, forcing the head straight up and backward. Malfoy completely lost his balance and fell hard against the corridor wall, and Harry jerked the wand from Malfoy's grasp with his left hand. Switching Malfoy's wand to his right hand, Harry laughed at the blonde.

"Ooooh, would you look at that, the pureblood Death Eater sycophant who licks the arse of a half-blood tyrant got his own arse kicked by a half-blood who didn't even need to use magic."

The corridor was filled with other students, no doubt attracted by the screams from Crabbe and the sounds of a fight. Several gasped in apparent astonishment at the sight of the Prince of Slytherin leaning on the wall, completely humiliated.

Malfoy surged up in anger and threw a punch at Harry. Harry blocked the pathetic attempt with his left arm while driving his right hand forward at Malfoy's chest. The blonde's wand shot off sparks and started hissing as Harry used it as a spike to nail Malfoy's shoulder to the wall. The blonde boy started screaming in pain, eyes widening in horror as Harry casually snapped off the bit of wand left sticking out. Harry tossed the wand fragment at the boy's feet with a snort of disgust.

“Here’s your lesson, Death Eater-boy. Don’t try to attack me again, or I promise you, I will kill you. I do hope you enjoy the rest of the trip, Draco.” Harry stalked back into his compartment and threw the bodies of Crabbe and Goyle out of it. Glaring at Malfoy’s piteous moans, Harry grunted in irritation. “If you don’t shut up, I’ll be forced to magically silence you. Stop whinging, you big girl’s blouse. Act your age and not your shoe size. ” Malfoy obviously gritted his teeth in an attempt to stop moaning in pain and just sat sniffing and breathing heavily. Harry then slammed the door closed, effectively scaring off any would-be questioners.

Wiping some of Malfoy’s blood from his hands and onto his trousers, he looked back at some openly surprised people in the compartment, who were clearly in various stages of shock, some even half-in and half-out of their seats. Harry sat back down casually, “What were you saying about Quidditch again, Ron?”

“You... you... you’re Harry Potter?” Ron asked in a whisper.

Harry just sighed, looked at them all, and flipped his hair up to expose the scar.

“Blimey!” muttered Ron. Ginny said something very quietly that suspiciously sounded like “Eeep!” while Neville just leaned away from Harry looking scared. Hermione’s eyes became bright and focused on Harry, while Hannah had gone as pale as a ghost.

“I’ve read about you! You’re in—” Hermione began.

“It’s all bollocks, Hermione. Just because you read it in a book somewhere doesn’t make it true, you know. I’ve read everything that the standard books on the subject have said about me, and it’s all complete tosh. Anything you read about me specifically was totally fabricated and has no basis in reality.” Harry stared at her while she slowly reddened.

Sighing again, Harry concentrated on the scenery passing by the window. “Look, we were getting along perfectly fine before you found out that I’m some supposed mythical magical saviour. No one really knows why that event happened, and I certainly don’t think it’s right

for me to take the credit for my parents' sacrifice. So can you all please just forget all that Boy-Who-Lived rubbish?"

A rather heavy silence settled over the compartment. Harry sighed in resignation. He just knew that actually living in the magical world was going to be very challenging to his limited patience and tolerance for stupidity. One of these days he was going to have to let go of his frustrations, but not today.

"Err, why didn't you come to Hogwarts before?" Hermione asked slowly.

Harry just shrugged as he was rapidly becoming accustomed to doing and repeated himself. "I already told you that it's complicated. Maybe someday we'll talk about it, but maybe we won't." Harry decided the safest place to rest his eyes was on the ceiling; that way, he was less aware of the intense scrutiny of the other people in the compartment.

"Harry?" Ginny asked quietly.

"Yes?"

"How did you learn to fight like that?" Harry could hear the indrawn breath of several of the students.

"I've been in training for years. It's something in general called martial arts, but my particular fighting style is aikijujitsu. It's what the traditional Japanese samurai trained in a long time ago." The silence permeated the compartment.

"Harry?" Ginny started again.

"Mmmm?"

"Is it possible... uh, would you consider... uh, teaching that?" Ginny paused before continuing in a rush. "I'd really like to learn."

"Why?" Harry asked, still staring absently at the gash in the ceiling left from Malfoy's curse. Based on the depth and length, Harry suspected

it would have been fatal to more than just he had he not knocked Malfoy's arm out of the way.

A sudden rustling of shifting bodies caused Harry to look back at the other students. Everyone seemed distinctly uncomfortable. Ginny was staring at the floor, and Hermione looked a little scared. Ron was clearly trying to figure out how to talk about something when Neville spoke up.

"There have been a lot of... altercations... over the past four years. There is a professor who is... less than fair, and he's the head of Slytherin House. No matter how physically aggressive his students get, he will never punish them and the Headmaster just ignores the problem." Neville shrugged awkwardly. "If we try to fight back with magic, we get into trouble. A couple of times when we've... been a little physical in response, we haven't been reprimanded. Problem is, none of us really know how to fight very well."

Harry looked closely at the eyes of each student. He saw mostly despair and frustration, but there was a glimmer of hope. "You want me to teach just you lot?" Harry asked.

Hermione shuffled her feet and cautiously replied, "Well, Malfoy and his crew kind of run over everyone else as well... would you consider teaching others who want to learn too?"

Harry put his head in his hands and sighed again. "Look, I haven't agreed to teach anyone yet. I'll think about it, alright? If I see any kind of crap going on, I'll definitely put a stop to it. I think I can handle Draco and his cronies. If Snape is such a problem, he's likely to be hard to work around. I'll think how to do that. Good enough for now?"

Ginny smiled weakly. "We'll ask you again in a few days, shall we?"

Harry nodded briefly. "Can you tell me just how far this problem has gone?" he asked.

Now everyone except Harry was looking at the floor. Harry made an executive decision to wait them out and resumed his intense study of the ceiling damage.

"Well," Ron started quietly. "A lot of us have learned to travel in groups. The – uh – pureblood supporters are left alone, but almost everyone else..." Ron tapered off, looking out the window.

Neville picked up where Ron left off. "There are rumours of beatings, or... ahh... overly affectionate advances, you know?" Harry looked at Neville impassively. Neville appeared a little ashamed about the situation. "We've complained to the professors, to the Heads of our Houses, but nothing ever really changes. Last year, well, people who complained ended up making a lot of involuntary visits to the hospital wing." Neville rubbed absently at his left arm, which made Harry think he had suffered some of the more aggressive behaviour himself.

Harry looked directly at Ginny, who was still looking at the floor. "Ginny." She glanced briefly at Harry before averting her brown eyes again. "Ginny, please look at me." Ginny, with visible reluctance, lifted her gaze to Harry, her face blushing slightly. "Why haven't you fought back in other ways? Ambush? Physically kicking the living crap out of them? Sabotage? Anything?"

Ron opened his mouth, as did Hermione, but Harry shot his hand out, palm facing them. Harry only wanted to hear Ginny's response.

A sharp rapping on the compartment door caused everyone to look at the door, where a pretty Asian girl was looking through the glass. Ginny got up and opened the door. "Cho," she said while nodding briefly.

Cho stepped in and glanced at everyone before settling her gaze on Harry. "Err, you're Harry Potter, yes?" she asked hesitantly.

Harry glanced at the shiny badge on her robe and realized that she must be some kind of authority figure among students. Nodding briefly, he waited to find out what was coming.

"Err, look, regardless of what I feel about it, I've been ordered to come and collect you for what you did to Malfoy and his boys. You've got to come with me, okay?"

Harry shrugged, waved vaguely at the other students and followed Cho to the front of the train.

As the door was closing, Harry heard Hermione asking Ron, "What were those silver emblems on the shoulders of his robes...?" Harry smirked, looking forward to how the Headmaster was going to explain to his students what was coming.

The staff was already aware of his arrival, and Harry was pleased to see that some of his preparations would be coming in quite handy within a few hours. He was somewhat surprised Malfoy had ignored the embroidered mace on his left shoulder and the dagger on the right, given all his prattling about tradition and history.

As Harry passed several compartments, he noted the many grinning faces. Several students looked up as he passed to give tentative nods or smiles. A pair of twin red-headed boys gave him a thumbs-up gesture and a mocking salute.

"Uh, Cho, wasn't it?" Harry asked the pretty girl. She looked at Harry and nodded. "I thought people were anxious or hesitant when I watched them milling around on the platform, but now they all seem to be smiling. Why? It's more than just being happy about going back to school, isn't it?"

Cho laughed quietly and said just one word. "Malfoy."

"Ah, I see." Harry reflected for a few more moments before realizing that the new train carriage which they had stepped into had compartments which seemed to be filled with green-trimmed students, who were all either outright hostile in appearance or carefully neutral in expression. "The Slytherins seem rather concentrated," Harry noted as they left the carriage.

"They don't believe in mingling with their inferiors," Cho replied. Finally she stopped outside the very first compartment on the train. "You're going to be Portkeyed to Hogwarts with Malfoy and his two sidekicks. Professor Snape is waiting for you in there. Best of luck." She smiled briefly at him. Harry nodded at her and stepped into the compartment.

A tall but stooped professor with matted black hair which looked a little unclean glared at Harry as he entered. "Potter... we meet at last," he said in an icy tone, a deep sneer on his face. "Attacking other students and you're not even at school yet. I'll see you expelled for this, I think."

Harry deliberately yawned at the professor, completely underwhelmed at the feeble attempt at intimidation. As Harry continued to look impassively at the man that was flexing his jaw muscles silently, he suddenly felt a slight brush against his mental shields. Yelling inwardly in triumph, Harry merely raised one eyebrow and waited for the man to realize he was doomed to failure. After all, Harry had shields constructed after extensive training by the best tutors money could buy for five years now. Nothing could get in; Harry's mind was immune even to attacks from co-ordinated multiple opponents.

Glaring hard at Harry, Snape apparently gave up his efforts and pointed to the rope which connected the three injured and unconscious students. "Take hold of the Portkey. We're going to Hogwarts now."

Harry shifted his gaze to the tall man with a shaved head and dark skin standing in the corner. Snape briefly flicked his eyes in the same direction. "Auror Shacklebolt will be accompanying us. You didn't think a vicious assault on students would go unpunished, did you?"

Harry lazily grabbed the rope and watched as Snape waited for the Auror to touch it. Snape then tapped his wand against it, whisking them all straight to the hospital wing.

Harry landed lightly on his feet and took a quick glance around the room. The matron of the hospital wing was standing nearby and quickly levitated the three injured boys into beds to begin working on them.

"We're going to the Headmaster, Potter." Snape pointed to the doors and barked at Harry, "Move, or I will force you." Harry merely rolled his eyes and gestured for Snape to precede him.

Snape turned sharply, his cloak billowing behind him, and stalked through the doors. Harry followed at a quick pace, hearing the tall Auror fall in behind him, and started considering how to manage Snape.

Considering what Ginny and her friends had told him, Snape was a major part of the problem with individuals like Malfoy. It was people like Snape who, either directly or indirectly, encouraged the blood purity dogma which was poisoning the magical world in Europe. The man's casual use of Legilimency was illegal, and Harry was curious how much rope he could provide Snape to hang himself with. At the very least, Harry felt he could fill quite a few evenings and weekends finding ways to improve Snape's behaviour or, failing that, to induce a stroke or some other debilitating condition. Prison suddenly seemed like a kinder alternative for the man as Harry considered the point.

Harry and his two escorts cum guards entered the office space of the Headmaster, who nodded briefly to apparently acknowledge the adults' presence. Dumbledore looked at Harry for a long moment and then pointed to the lone chair in front of his desk. As Harry sat down, Dumbledore pointed to each person in the room in turn. "Mr Potter, these are Professor Sprout, the Head of Hufflepuff House; Professor Snape, whom you have met, is the Head of Slytherin House; Professor Flitwick, the Head of Ravenclaw House; and Professor McGonagall, the Head of Gryffindor. Senior Auror Shacklebolt is here as an official witness and, if necessary, will press charges and arrest anyone who may be found to require trial or expulsion. Is this quite clear?" The twinkle Harry had heard so much about was nowhere evident in the Headmaster's eyes. Harry nodded his acceptance.

The Headmaster surveyed Harry and then continued in a very serious tone. "Mr Potter, you are being accused of the attempted murder of three students. You will be charged and arrested if you cannot justify your actions to us."

Snape looked ready to murder with his bare hands. "Headmaster! There were witnesses! Why are we even having this discussion?! Potter should be expelled, his wand snapped, and charged with attempted murder!"



The Headmaster glanced at Snape briefly before looking at the Auror. "Kingsley, as Head of the Wizengamot, I would like to request that you commit your memories of these events to a judicial Pensieve for later examination by the full Wizengamot in case any trial may be necessary. Is this agreeable to you?"

"Yes, Professor Dumbledore, it is" Harry was mildly surprised that the tall Auror had a quieter voice than he had expected – it was not the rumbling bass one would expect from such a physically powerful character; his voice was soft and, in some ways, almost melodious.

"Very well. First, Mr Potter, I would like to hear the events that transpired from your point of view. Please be aware that you will be subject to questioning, and anything you say here may be used in evidence against you, should the decision be made to go to trial as a result of what has happened today on the Hogwarts Express."

Harry casually surveyed the people in the room. Sighing slightly, Harry thought it was high time to start cleaning up things around Hogwarts. "Headmaster, before I do that, I would like to officially confirm what Hogwarts will do to any student who makes an attempt to violently assault another student. This is separate to whatever the Ministry or the Law may pronounce. The Head of Slytherin, your Professor Snape, indicated that the prescribed punishment included expulsion and wand snapping. Would you please confirm that what I have been told is correct?"

Dumbledore looked momentarily surprised before his features settled back into a blank mask. In turn, each of the respective Heads of House agreed as Dumbledore asked their opinions. Any student found guilty of such an offence would be expelled and their wand snapped if found guilty. Snape seemed to be positively gloating.

"Okay, now is that just for today's little scrum, or would that apply to all students at all times when they are officially in the care of Hogwarts, be it on the train, field trips, classrooms, or what not?" Harry was listening carefully as he was looking forward to using this conversation many times in the future.

Once again, the assembled professors and the headmaster all agreed with this comment.

“Excellent! Then I’m happy to say that, first I am innocent of all such charges, and that I also expect to see Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle expelled and their wands snapped very shortly!” Harry sat back with a serious look on his face.

Hearing this, Snape lost whatever composure he may once have possessed. “What the devil are you talking about, Potter? Your delusions or fancy stories won’t save you now. We have over a dozen witnesses to your vicious and unprovoked assault on Draco Malfoy, a highly-respected senior student in this school!!”

Dumbledore held a hand up to silence Snape and looked very carefully at Harry. “Do you have any evidence of this?”

Harry grinned at Snape, winked slyly at Dumbledore, and reached into his robes to withdraw a small, silvery orb, no larger than a Muggle golf ball. “This is one of my many sensory monitors. I usually have one running all the time. As I am sure you all know, this device will record everything I see and hear in an unalterable format which is admissible as courtroom evidence.” Harry paused here to savour Snape’s rather sallow complexion growing even sallower. “Few people seem to recall that these monitors also record magical activities, such as the signature of spells cast. Correct me if I’m wrong, Auror Shacklebolt, but is it not the case that most Aurors carry these whilst on duty and surrender them to the department at the end of every shift?”

Shacklebolt stirred slightly. “In the case of Senior Aurors, yes, you are quite correct. However, most junior Aurors do not carry them, as the time it takes to review so many monitors is considered an excessive drain on manpower within the department. Aurors on special assignments, such as investigations, are an exception to that general rule however. We use them because, unlike Pensieve memories, they cannot be altered or tampered with in any manner which does not visibly alter the sphere.”

Harry nodded politely to the Auror. Snape was now chalk white, and Dumbledore's eyes had recovered some of their legendary twinkle. Harry handed the sphere to the Auror and asked him, "Could you please verify that this sphere remains unaltered and confirm to us that it has not been tampered with?"

The Auror spent several minutes examining the sphere closely and casting a series of spells on it. It was clear to everyone in the room that all the tests were negative and that the sphere was in perfect condition. Shacklebolt handed it back to Harry. "It's fine. No tampering has taken place. My own sensory monitor has recorded these tests, and I would like to request that you allow me to copy yours when this meeting is finished."

Harry nodded in affirmation. Pulling out his wand, he set the sphere on the edge of Dumbledore's desk and then looked directly into the headmaster's eyes. "I started this recording when I arrived outside the entrance to the King's Cross station. I will now play it back. I beg your indulgence, as I've never learned how to speed up the playback, so unless someone here knows how to skip to the relevant place, we're going to have to watch about thirty minutes of unrelated activity before the events under investigation transpired."

Dumbledore pulled out his own wand and smiled at Harry. "Please allow me, Mr Potter. With your permission, I can adjust the playback rate. Just tell me when the events will begin to unfold." With a flick and jab of his wand, the sphere projected a scene of bustling Muggles in front of King's Cross station. As Dumbledore made erratic motions with his wand, the playback accelerated to nearly ten times normal rate.

Harry watched passively until the train got underway and then motioned to the headmaster. "If you could slow it down a bit, it won't be long now." Dumbledore dropped the playback rate to a mere thrice normal, and Harry tried to recall the conversation on the train. "Right about now, sir," Harry said, "if you would be so kind...?"

Dumbledore gave a final flick with his wand and the sphere returned to normal, projecting what Harry was seeing as well as hearing. Those assembled watched in silence as Malfoy and his followers

attacked Harry, despite his public warning, and how Harry defeated each of them soundly.

When Malfoy sprang up to continue the attack and Harry drove the wand into his shoulder, Professor Sprout let out a short gasp. Immediately after playback-Harry slammed the door to the compartment closed, Harry looked at Dumbledore. "Please stop it here but don't reset the playback. There will be more we need to discuss after we deal with your expulsion of Draco Malfoy and his cohorts."

Meanwhile, Snape was staring at Harry and Dumbledore with his mouth open in shock like a fish out of water. Shacklebolt showed no emotion, but Harry had the distinct impression that he was privately quite entertained. Dumbledore, however, was closely watching Harry, and while his mythical twinkle was not immediately apparent to a casual observer, there was no doubt that some of that twinkle was definitely present.

"Well," the Headmaster started, "it seems that Mr Potter was defending himself from a vicious attack. It seems to me that Mr Potter is quite correct; based on our earlier agreement, Mr Malfoy, Mr Crabbe, and Mr Goyle should face expulsion and wand-breaking. Does anyone disagree with this?"

Harry looked up. "I do. I would also like press charges against Draco Malfoy for at least six attempted murders – if his curse had hit anyone, it would have, in all probability, been fatal to the targets, and based on the damage to the roof of the compartment, it would have definitely killed more than one person."

Snape was clearly fuming by this point. "Come now, Mr Potter, that curse could never have been fatal."

Harry merely pointed to the playback, which showed a deep gash across the metal ceiling of the train compartment. "That 'non-fatal' curse gouged a two-inch wide and several-foot-long gash in solid steel. I would not like to imagine what it would have done to someone's body." Harry looked contemptuously at Snape. "Auror Shacklebolt, do you not agree that, at a minimum, I can press

charges of six counts of attempted murder on Mr Malfoy and attempted assault of my person on Mr Crabbe and Mr Goyle?"

Shacklebolt simply nodded his head. Dumbledore look resigned to the situation. "Very well, Mr Potter. I hereby declare those three students are expelled and that their wands to be snapped. Furthermore, I remand them into the custody of Auror Shacklebolt for processing as soon as this meeting is over. Is there anything else related to these events which we need to deal with, or may we release Auror Shacklebolt now?" Dumbledore was looking expectantly at Harry, as though there was nothing else to be discussed.

Harry looked at Snape with a large, fake smile. "Oh yes, there is one other thing. Auror Shacklebolt, is it still the law that any attempt to use Legilimency on another without their consent or a direct order from the Wizengamot is an offence punishable by at least a one thousand Galleon fine and a week in Azkaban?"

Snape became motionless, as the Auror gave Harry a hard stare. "It is. Why?"

Harry smiled even more broadly at Snape. "Is it also still true that to perform these acts upon a minor without said authorisation or a legal guardian's consent makes the fine ten thousand Galleons, the prison sentence six months, and an automatic restraining order for the perpetrator so that they cannot be within fifty yards on all minors when not closely monitored by an Auror?"

Snape was now looking frantically at Dumbledore, who was frowning sharply at Harry. Shacklebolt, however, had no choice but to reply, as his own sensory monitor was activated upon entering Hogwarts so that all of these events would be used for evidence. "Yes. Are you accusing someone of these acts?"

Harry looked right at Dumbledore before nodding his head. "Professor Snape attempted Legilimency on me when I was taken to him on the train. I hereby officially declare that I would like to press those very charges against him. If you would be so kind as to advance the playback, you will see the evidence in the sensory

monitor. As you all should know, Legilimency will cause a unique azure blue aura to appear around the caster and an aura of gold around the recipient. You will see that Professor Snape did attempt Legilimency upon me without any warning or consent, and that I am clearly still a minor as all the world is aware.”

At this statement, there was absolute silence in the room. Even the phoenix in the corner was completely motionless. Dumbledore looked at Harry and almost gave the impression of begging with his eyes. “Mr Potter, are you quite sure that you wish to press charges against Professor Snape? He has many important duties, many of which simply cannot be performed by anyone else.”

“No one man is an island, Headmaster.” Harry offered the Headmaster a slight frown as he considered Dumbledore’s request. “I will press charges. I am asking you again, as Chief Wizard of the Wizengamot, to advance the playback to the point where your Professor Snape attempted Legilimency upon me, in defiance of the law, and to bear witness to his unlawful behaviour.”

With a resigned sigh and an obviously cautionary look at Snape, Dumbledore adjusted the playback on the sphere until everyone could easily see the indicated auras and the ample evidence completely damning Snape.

Auror Shacklebolt stepped up to Snape and extended his hand. “Severus Snape, I hereby charge you with unlawful mental assault upon a minor without provocation or authorisation. Hand me your wand, and I’ll accept your word of compliance to accompany me to the Ministry along with the students already being charged.”

Snape gave Harry a glare of such pure loathing and profound hate that Harry was surprised that the phoenix failed to react in any way. Handing his wand to Shacklebolt, Snape stared hard at Dumbledore before moving toward the door.

“One moment,” called Dumbledore. “Is there anything else, Mr Potter?”

Harry shook his head. “No. Auror Shacklebolt, please make a copy of my monitor, as I wish to retain the original in my possession for safekeeping.”

Shacklebolt produced a second sensory monitor, placed it next to Harry’s and cast a short charm. The new sphere glowed bright yellow for what felt like two minutes or so before it returned to its usual silvery colour. Everyone in the room was silent in the awkward moments involved. Finally picking up his copy of the monitor orb, Shacklebolt nodded to everyone and went to stand by Snape at the door.

“Mr Potter,” Dumbledore began, “if you would please wait here for a few minutes. I must accompany Auror Shacklebolt to the hospital wing to hand out the punishment to your attackers, and then I will be back. There is much I wish to discuss with you. Is this acceptable? It will be some time yet before the other students arrive.”

Harry nodded his head indicating that this was. Dumbledore looked at the other professors. “Minerva, as Deputy Headmistress, I need you to join me. If the rest of you wouldn’t mind waiting here, we will return shortly. Feel free to ask the house elves for refreshments.”

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A/N

To make it clear, I have tampered with the birthdays of Ginny and Ron compared to JKR’s canon – yes, they are both in fifth year.

Canon Birthdays: Hermione, Sep 1979; Ron, Mar 1980; Harry, Jul 1980; Ginny, Aug 1981.

AU Birthdays: Hermione, Sep 1979; Ron, Sep 1979; Harry, Jul 1980; Ginny, Aug 1980.

I will state it here for the record since this chapter (and future chapters) uses phrasing that is deliberately ambiguous regarding what has been “going on” at Hogwarts: Ginny was not raped.

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to cwarbeck and Chreechree. Thanks to Reg for Brit-picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded. Parakletos gave a thorough once-over for the re-editing process to be sure we missed nothing (or at least, as little as possible).



## Chapter 2: Waking Up

“Mr Potter,” Professor Flitwick began, “do you really feel that the amount of force you used against those three boys was appropriate? Professor Dumbledore informed us of your unusual status, but surely you could have been less brutal.”

Harry realized that this was one conversation that was likely to become very tedious, very quickly. “The human mind is a negative feedback mechanism, and the more humiliating the incident, the longer it will be burned into the brain. It does wonders for teaching manners.”

With the professors glowering at his flippant response, Harry gave a casual shrug of indifference and tried for a more innocent look. “Tell me, Professor Flitwick, do you really feel that the lack of punishment for bullying and harassing the other students by those three ‘boys’ was appropriate?” Harry did his best to look like an eager young student waiting for a lecture to begin.

The professors, for their part, shifted uneasily in the chairs they were sitting in, apparently preparing for a long discussion of events with Harry.

Flitwick scowled slightly as he regarded Harry. “I thought those students were being punished. When we passed along student complaints, both Albus and Severus told us they would take care of the problem.” He paused for a moment to look closely at Harry. “Are you telling me that they were not punished?”

Harry shrugged his shoulders again. “Honestly, I don’t have any direct personal knowledge. From what I was told by more than one student, however, it would seem that no, they weren’t punished in any real way. Moreover, those who did complain seemed to find themselves in the hospital wing shortly after every complaint. Does that seem to indicate that the offending students were being effectively reprimanded?”

Flitwick frowned again before looking to the other Head of House. Professor Sprout looked unhappy as she turned to face Harry directly.

“Well, is that why the complaints dropped off? I thought it was an indication that the problems had ceased.”

“Maybe you should be asking your students these questions yourself,” Harry offered in return. After a rather awkward moment of silence, his stomach growled loudly. “Would it be possible to get some sandwiches? It's been a very long time since breakfast.”

Flitwick nodded quickly before calling out, “Blinken!” With a soft pop! an elf appeared by the professor.

“Master calls?”

Harry felt his eyebrows rise involuntarily. He had no knowledge that professors had their own personal house-elves at the castle. Flitwick seemed to catch Harry's surprise, for he gestured to the elf and kept his eyes on Harry. “Blinken is not my personal house-elf. Instead, she is assigned to me as a Hogwarts professor, and as long as I am an instructor here, Blinken treats me as though I were a proper Master.”

Harry nodded his acceptance of the information, but Flitwick had already turned back to his house-elf. “Would you please bring us some sandwiches and tea? And perhaps a butterbeer or three for Mr Potter?” Blinken smiled happily before disappearing with another soft pop!

“Thank you,” Harry said politely. “Back to the point, though, why do any of you trust that Death Eater to be an educator of children? Does no one monitor him to make sure his actions are appropriate? And does the person in charge of the hospital wing not report back to the Heads of House when a student is injured?”

Professor Sprout seemed shocked at Harry's blatant accusations, regardless of the kind words he had used, but Flitwick merely looked like he had eaten a Super Sour Sherbet Lemon. He recovered enough to answer first. “As for the injured students, no, Madam Pomfrey does not generally inform us. She does tell the Headmaster of every incident, but she only lets us know if anything serious has occurred that requires an overnight stay. Between being a professor, a Head of House, and monitoring the wards on the castle, we don't

really have the time to deal with lesser matters such as who is sick for some reason. Most people are in and out in less than an hour. Maybe we should suggest some changes or something..." Flitwick trailed off thoughtfully. Whilst he was thinking, Blinken reappeared with a tray of food and drinks. After setting it down on an end table, the house-elf returned, presumably, to her usual duties.

Harry helped himself to two sandwiches and a butterbeer, letting Flitwick and Sprout talk quietly with each other for a minute or two. It seemed utterly ludicrous that a person nominally responsible for keeping track of up to a hundred students would receive no notice of injuries, ailments, or other problems concerning those very students. Students here were clearly dumped into a sink-or-swim pool, and if what those on the train had said was true, no effort had been made to harpoon the sharks.

This suggested deeper problems, and Harry was disinclined to get involved. Perhaps finally agreeing to attend Hogwarts was a mistake after all. It would certainly make things difficult for his own plans if he were constantly dealing with idiots and their fumbling attempts to neutralize his own resources.

After devouring two sandwiches, during which he somewhat absently noting how rich the food was in flavour and basic quality of ingredients, Harry decided he wanted to get the rest of his answers regarding Snape before Dumbledore returned. He cleared his throat briefly to get the attention of the other two professors.

"Would you mind answering a few of my questions about Snape?" Harry asked politely.

Flitwick sat back and studied the ceiling. "What makes you think he's a Death Eater?"

Harry smirked. "Please, as the head of the so-called brainy house, don't act like an idiot."

Sprout huffed and shifted noisily at Harry's flagrant disrespect, but Flitwick sighed before looking back at Harry. "Honestly? Because Albus Dumbledore swears that Snape can be trusted and is a spy for

our side against You-Know-Who. Snape seems to be bitter and twisted most of the time, but I have to say that he's first-rate at Potions and their applications. I'm not sure he knows how to teach, but he does know the material better than many who are entitled to be called Potions Master. He's nearly as good as his original mentor."

Harry slowly let his gaze move to the fireplace. "Thank you for your candid answer. In reality, the evidence of Snape being a spy goes both ways. Personally, after reviewing the evidence and many Pensieve memories from different witnesses, coupled with events from this summer . . . I don't trust him. I think he's either working for himself or is in truth actually aligned with Voldemort, especially since his rebirth."

"What?!" Flitwick shot to his feet, and Harry realised for the first time just how diminutive the man was. "What are you talking about? And what do you mean that Voldemort has been reborn?"

Any opportunity to reply was curtailed, as the merry trilling of the phoenix in the corner indicated that the Headmaster was returning. Moving his chair so that the back faced the solid wall rather than the door, Harry waited patiently. After mere moments, the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress walked in together. Both returning professors picked up a cup of tea before seating themselves next to Flitwick and Sprout, forming a semi-circle of professors facing Harry.

"Mr Potter," Dumbledore began after sipping from his teacup, "do you realize that the charges you are levelling against Professor Snape are going to make a great many things very difficult? In fact, you may be placing the lives of many innocents at risk!" Clearly Dumbledore was less than pleased with Harry.

Harry smiled blandly at the Headmaster. This was going to be fun. "I prefer to think of it as eliminating a major risk of serious injury or death for the students under your care. Or do you think that some lives are intrinsically more valuable than others?"

Dumbledore blinked twice before returning to an external state of calm. "And what are you referring to? Severus is not a threat to the students here."

Harry continued his bland, mindless smile. He hoped that it would irritate the Headmaster, as legend held the man to be nearly unflappable. "You mean that letting his Slytherin slugs terrorize, brutalize, and sexually abuse other students without reprimand was helping all those students in some magical way?"

Dumbledore sat back in his chair. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Professor McGonagall shifted in her seat, leaning forward to look more closely at Harry, a stern and disapproving gaze making his hackles rise.

"Really?" Harry felt his irritation truly rising now. "So you are telling me that you didn't receive unceasing reports from the matron of the hospital wing of injuries to students? Suspicious injuries? You did not notice the lack of Slytherin student injuries? You did not notice the steady stream of accusations of student abuse from the other Heads of House to your not-as-tame-as-you-think Death Eater?" Harry's voice had become increasingly cold. "For a man who is reported to be extremely observant with at least a genius-level IQ, as well as supposedly being very bloody sneaky, I find your statement to be fallacious at best."

Harry was still very irritated and on the verge of a dangerous state of anger. At the same time, he was inwardly pleased to see Dumbledore visibly reacting now and starting to look ever so slightly annoyed. "What do you know of Death Eaters or Severus?" Dumbledore's own voice was frosty.

"Heard any new prophecies lately, old man?" Harry casually drawled in imitation of Malfoy's superior attitude. Dumbledore's look of utter shock caused Harry to make a mental note to send a copy of his sensory monitor to his tutors. Otherwise no one would believe that Harry had caught Dumbledore completely bent out of joint.

Professor McGonagall, however, recoiled as if slapped. "Show some respect, Mr Potter! Were school in session, I would have you in

detention for a month!" She seemed honestly upset and affronted at Harry's casual and mildly insulting demeanour.

Harry stared back at McGonagall. "Oh? And how should I address someone who is clearly lying to me? And, for that matter, lying to all of you? Someone who has been withholding critical information from me for a great many years now?" Harry then turned his attention back to Dumbledore. "For a leader of the Light side, I'm not very impressed."

McGonagall appeared amazed that anyone would talk back to her, let alone a student. Dumbledore showed increasing signs of anger and irritation. "I believe it is time that Mr Potter and I had a frank discussion in private. I ask you all to please leave us and to verify that everything is prepared for the students' arrival in a few hours."

Harry and Dumbledore continued to stare at each other balefully as the other professors departed. When the door closed, the Headmaster abruptly stood and moved behind his desk. Sweeping his wand in dozens of intricate movements whilst muttering under his breath, a palpable feeling of power soon permeated the room. "Very well, this room is now secure from listening and scrying attempts. Let us be frank with one another, Mr Potter. Very frank." Dumbledore stared hard at Harry for a long moment.

Harry merely yawned in the face of Dumbledore's ire, much like he had with Snape. Their efforts at intimidation were completely inadequate. He was quite pleased with how things were going thus far and saw no reason to change tactics – yet. If he could keep Dumbledore on edge, perhaps he could actually pry loose some of the secrets that had been evading his grasp for the past four years.

"First, do you know what role Severus plays in things?" Dumbledore peered quite intently at Harry.

Harry reverted to his innocent, vacant, school-boy look. "Of course. You think he spies for you, but in reality, you don't really know who he works for. It could be you, it could be Voldemort, it could be himself, or it could even be me. Isn't that fun, guessing who he supports today?" Harry was almost positive that the combination of his facial

expression and deliberately light voice was grating on the Headmaster's nerves like nothing else in recent memory.

Dumbledore remained standing and glaring at Harry. "I have full faith that Severus is working for me and the side of the Light. I am asking you to drop your charges against him. We think that Voldemort is coming back into power, perhaps even seeking to gain a new body. I need the information that only Severus can provide!"

Harry could not stop himself, as he started laughing at Dumbledore. The man's expression and naiveté in trusting Snape were beyond the pale as far as Harry was concerned. Dumbledore's demeanour gradually became more angry, and were Harry easily intimidated, he might have stopped laughing sooner. As it was, it took a long moment to be completely calm again. "Really, Dumbledore, you are a fool. Has Severus not told you yet that Voldemort has regained a new body?"

"What?!" The roar of irritation and the magical charge in the air caused the furniture to shake slightly and the phoenix to take to the air, singing a calming song to placate Dumbledore's temper. "You will tell me what you know! Now!"

Harry smiled with a grin more appropriate for a drunken gambler stumbling into a major casino. "Oh? I will? Why should I?" Harry nonchalantly began a leisurely inspection of his fingernails.

It was obvious to even a casual observer that Dumbledore was close to a towering rage, although Harry suspected that the trilling phoenix was curtailing the man's actions. At the same time, he knew his calculated indifference about telling Dumbledore what he wanted to know should be making him desperate. At this point, either the old man would stoop to asking and cajoling, or else he would lash out and demand the information. Harry further knew that by not asserting any claims of mental defence from Snape's invasion, any trained Legilimens would immediately assume that Harry had no shields at all. Given that in the right circles, people knew that Dumbledore was only second to Voldemort in Occlumency and Legilimency, Harry was extremely curious to see which way the headmaster would move –

hastily attacking and demanding, or patiently cultivating logic for why Harry should tell the man everything he knew.

Harry kept his face as neutral as possible as the headmaster's power clearly gathered, and when he felt a full assault against his mental defences, he knew the answer. Dumbledore clearly was not used to being thwarted on something so critical. Though the man's powerful attack was impressive, Dumbledore's face revealed the blatant shock of encountering Harry's well-protected mind. As his tutors had worked so hard on his skills, he knew that to an unprepared attacker, it was as though Harry's mind simply did not exist . . . as if he were, in fact, dead.

Harry gave the headmaster a wicked grin. "Tsk, tsk, Headmaster. I think, just this once, I will overlook your actions and not press charges against you – even though my sensory monitor has just caught you doing illegal Legilimency against me. That was a rather amateurish attempt to control my mind, you do realize?" The mocking tone in Harry's voice was apparently completely lost on the Headmaster, who slumped into his seat, staring at the boy in front of him in obvious confusion.

After a long silence, Dumbledore finally looked Harry in the eye and asked the question he seemed suddenly afraid of knowing the answer to. "Who are you?"

"Me? Why, I'm the Boy-Who-Lived, didn't you know that?" Harry smirked evilly. There was no way this memory was not getting sent back home for blackmail material. In all likelihood, someday Dumbledore and Harry would be allies and possibly even friends, but there was a long keel to haul to get there. Playing this back later should be good for hours of entertainment.

"I don't understand. You refused to attend Hogwarts for four years. You announce out of the blue that you are ready to attend. I put out feelers, and no one could name or think of anyone who had tutored you. Yet you sit there clearly knowing more than I can guess. How is this possible?" Dumbledore looked resigned to a situation he would have little control over for the moment.



“Do you really understand what it means to be the Boy-Who-Lived? What that whole vanquish-Dark-lord fine print really means? What kind of power I have inside of me?” Harry looked mildly surprised that Dumbledore of all people had failed to consider this. “I've had training, trust me. When, where, what, and who are irrelevant questions at the moment as far as you're concerned. The why of the matter stems from that bloody prophecy. What I want from you are concessions. You'll agree to my terms, or I'll be out of here before the feast even starts. We both know that once I get Sorted, I'm bound by oath to finish at least my O.W.L. exams before I can leave permanently – just like every other student – barring expulsion. In return, I'll give you some answers – including what happened with Voldemort.”

Dumbledore slumped forward and, in a clearly unthinking reflex, popped a lemon drop into his mouth. “What concessions do you require?” he asked, wariness evident in his tone.

“Nothing drastic, Granddad. You will tell me everything you know about Voldemort, everything you suspect, and as soon as you find out something new or hear a rumour relating to him, you will tell me as soon as possible – even if I'm in class or sleeping. In return, I will make you the same offer. Likewise, you will tell me or take me to a copy of the entirety of any and all prophecies relating to Voldemort or myself, or those you suspect might do so. I don't like partial information, and just knowing the first bit of that whole ‘vanquish’ rubbish has been irritating the hell out of me for over four years now.” Harry sat back and regarded Dumbledore coolly.

Dumbledore sat staring at Harry for a while, clearly lost in thought. “Alright, Mr Potter, I will agree. What you are asking for is what I already planned to do, but not until you were older and had finished Hogwarts. Since I now appear to have little choice in the matter . . .” Dumbledore just sighed slowly, nodding in acceptance of the demands.

Harry shook his head. “No, sorry, that won't work. You're too good at being clever and sneaky. I want an Unbreakable Vow. I will give the same in return. After all, we don't trust each other yet. We can play catch-up on Voldemort after the feast since there's likely too much

information to share before then, and we still have other things to get through before I'll agree to stay here."

With obviously great trepidation and reluctant frustration, Dumbledore swore an Unbreakable Vow to Harry, promising to inform him as soon as possible of any and all developments relating to Voldemort, and Harry reciprocated with his oath to Dumbledore.

In the moments after the exchange of oaths, Harry suspected that Dumbledore had ultimately decided that there was little to be gained by hiding from this unexpected development, as Dumbledore finally regarded Harry with no particular emotion or twinkle in his eye. After slowly assuming a blank expression, Dumbledore asked, "What must we discuss next?"

"Let's talk about Draco Malfoy and his friends. Why have you let them get away with so much?" Harry was genuinely curious to find out why the Headmaster had permitted a clearly dangerous situation to continue.

Dumbledore leaned back into his chair, tenting his finger tips as he seemed to collect his thoughts. "Mr Potter – would you mind if I call you Harry since we'll clearly be seeing quite a bit of each other?" Harry waved his hand in an indifferent motion, and Dumbledore continued. "Harry, have you ever given someone a second chance?"

"Of course."

"Then why should I not give the same opportunity to those children who have been brain-washed into believing as their parents do? Do they not deserve the opportunity to learn for themselves that those beliefs are invalid? Or should we condemn the child with the parent, even though the child has never properly learned right and wrong?" Dumbledore paused, looking expectantly at Harry.

Harry wanted to groan with the oversimplification that Dumbledore was making. "Tell me, Headmaster, if a rabid dog bites a puppy, thus making the puppy rabid, would you think it appropriate to permit the rabid puppy to run freely amongst all the other puppies?"

Dumbledore frowned briefly. "Of course not. Even if it is only a puppy, the saliva will carry rabies to all that come into contact with it. But young Mr Malfoy and his peers are not rabid or contagious, so your connection does not work. By your own example and actions on the train, you are implying that we should eradicate someone for their acts even when they have no knowledge of the real right or wrong. That is what I cannot condone."

Sighing softly, Harry thought he saw the problem the Headmaster had with his peculiar vision and desire for granting second chances. "Let me suggest a different parallel, then. Would you agree that a person suffering from dementia should not be allowed weapons, for fear of the damage they might do to themselves or others?"

"Certainly."

"And would you agree that hands, feet, elbows, sticks, knives, guns, wands, and, most importantly, the human mind are all weapons that can cause extreme harm, if not death itself?" Harry slowly leaned forward, wanting to drill in his next point.

"Yes." The Headmaster seemed uncertain where Harry's line of questioning was headed. It was clear that though Dumbledore understood that the students were perfectly in possession of their faculties, he most likely thought they were just skewed in their beliefs.

"And what would you recommend doing to a person suffering from dementia?" Harry asked.

"Well, in general, you confine them in such a way as to ensure the safety of everyone, and then proceed to treat their illness – whether by therapy, potions, or something else. The primary aim is to safely contain the poor soul and to help them heal." Dumbledore started to lean forward as well, obviously curious to see what the connection would be.

Harry wanted to smirk, but given how much he had already pushed the headmaster, he kept his face neutral. "And do you agree with the common definition of dementia, which states that it is either not being

aware of one's own actions through illness, or being incapable of telling wrong from right in their own mind?"

Dumbledore just stared at Harry. The phoenix on his shoulder let out a soft cry, before flying back to its perch in the corner. After some time, Dumbledore blinked and seemed to become aware of his office again. "I think I see what you are trying to convey. You believe that they are the equivalent of a specific type of dementia and should be treated accordingly."

"Not really," Harry shook his head. "The problem as I understand it – and bear in mind this is based on limited observations today and comments made to me by others – is that you've set up a double standard and have no accountability in place. If they are safe enough to be students amongst the general population, then they should be treated as the rabid puppies they are – assaulting and molesting the other students, pushing their so-called brainwashing on others, and so forth and so on. If, however, you believe they cannot tell right from wrong, then they are not safe to be amongst the populace and they should be confined until therapy solves their problems – if they ever can be solved. You can't have it both ways, Headmaster. You are harbouring a group of students who are either rabid or demented, and they are already heavily armed with just their wands. Imagine the damage if they discover other means for inflicting pain and suffering? I applaud your aims but not your methods for trying to achieve them."

Harry leaned back in his seat, gazing impassively at the Headmaster. Even though Harry admitted that the man's goals were very noble, in that he wanted to offer a framework for those to learn a different point of view and perhaps change their allegiances, the horse led to water can only drink if it so chooses. Harry understood that you cannot change others by force or persuasion. In order to change, you have to want to change. The lack of repercussions to the problem cases only encouraged further assaults and cemented the abusers' sense of superiority.

It had taken years to really understand some of the underpinnings of how this magical society in England worked, even with the combined minds of his Muggle and magical tutors. As to whether the fundamental problems could ever be fixed, none of his mentors could

agree. The situation inside of Hogwarts, however, needed to be fixed, or this next war with Voldemort would be lost – even if Harry and his group won all the battles.

Dumbledore walked over to the window, obviously oblivious to the world as he absently petted the phoenix and stared out through the thin glass. Harry waited patiently for the headmaster to truly understand the point, taking the opportunity to study the contents of the man's office. The various paintings on the wall were either staring hard at Harry or whispering to each other as they moved through the different portraits. Behind Dumbledore's large desk was a tall, wooden stool with an old wizard's hat sitting on top of it. Turning his attention to the wall of books opposite the window, Harry rose and began examining the titles, searching for something new to read.

Harry caught movement in his peripheral vision when Dumbledore turned and watched Harry in front of the books. Harry let the man continue to think he was unaware of the scrutiny from across the office, only looking at the headmaster when he cleared his throat briefly.

Dumbledore nodded to the extensive collection of books. "Feel free to borrow any book that catches your interest. Please take only one at a time and return it before taking the next one. With regards to your views on Mr Malfoy and the other children, I must think more on this. Perhaps your proposal is the only approach for a solution, but I hope not. You are, however, correct to point out the damage that is being done to the other students through my inaction. I shall redress this tonight at the feast."

Harry paused in his inspection to look back at Dumbledore. "Thank you, sir." There was no reason not to be polite, now that he had successfully pushed Dumbledore off balance enough to listen to what people told him instead of selectively hearing what he probably thought was being said. The change may only last a short time, but it was enough to plant the major seeds as far as Harry was concerned. "And what of Snape?" Harry asked.

"Professor Snape, Harry," Dumbledore corrected absently. "You know I need him. You also must know that your charges against him will fail

and that he will return and be very hostile towards you. I also doubt your charges against the young Mr Malfoy and his two friends will stand up. The evidence doesn't really support the charges against his two friends, and you know that his father, Lucius, will spend all the money necessary to save his son from Azkaban. Unfortunately, I believe he will succeed with that plan."

Harry chuckled lightly. "Oh, I know. You could say that I'm counting on it." Turning back to the bookcases, Harry resumed his perusal before continuing. "I am happy enough for now that the students have been expelled and their wands will be snapped, forcing them to purchase new ones if another school will accept them – a school such as Durmstrang, perhaps. This will alleviate many fears here in Hogwarts, and at the same time will take much time and money away from Lucius. And if they should attack me again, I will be well within my rights to deal with them most firmly. I trust you will do something about those that remain?"

Dumbledore sighed rather audibly. "Yes, Harry, I will make an announcement tonight that should any student assault another student without due cause, they will be expelled and their wands snapped in two. I will continue to think about your dementia argument and try to find a usable solution since the Ministry and Board of Governors would never let me directly punish them that way."

Harry paused as he found a book that looked interesting. Pulling it out, he showed the cover to Dumbledore – whose eyes started twinkling again slightly – before pocketing it under his robes. A book like that demanded to be read slowly and carefully, and this was not the time to start. For casual reading or when otherwise bored, Harry had a copy of the latest David Weber paperback, Oath of Swords.

Dumbledore pulled out his pocket watch and looked back at Harry. "We should wrap this up soon, Harry. I need to prepare for the students arriving in the next hour or so. Is there anything else we should talk about before the feast, since we will be meeting afterward?"

Harry shrugged briefly. "We need to talk about what subjects I'll take, but we can do that later. We should discuss my living arrangements,

although I assume that has to wait until I've been Sorted. I would like your permission to freely come and go from the grounds when I am not required to be at a school function. I won't skip lessons, and I will keep up with my studies. As long as I do that, I expect you to let me travel unhindered. You already have my oath on keeping you informed about Voldemort's activities, so you'll know if my travel is for that purpose. Otherwise, I won't necessarily tell you the reasons why I am travelling."

Dumbledore grimaced before sitting behind his desk again. "This is most unusual, Harry. Can you not provide some examples of why you might need to leave? Your Head of House and I are, after all, nominally responsible for you."

"Oh, for many reasons, sir: to meet my tutors who cannot or will not come here, to deal with my financial obligations, to pick up materials which can't be ordered by Owl Post and which I require for my advanced studies. It's not just to pop out and meet a girl or two, although that's not a bad idea either, to be perfectly honest."

Dumbledore chuckled at Harry's comment. "Will you be able to provide me with some sort of notice and time frames, along with a general destination? Given your key role in the prophecy you already know part of, surely you understand my desire to ensure that your safety does not become compromised."

Harry looked thoughtful. "No, I'm sorry, I don't think I can do that. I can promise that anytime I'm going to be somewhere where I might be at real risk, I will ask you to arrange a guard. Otherwise, I have my mentors who like to act as guards and accompany me. I would just like to remind you, sir, that I've been on my own since before I was six years old and have dealt quite well with those problems peculiar to my status."

Dumbledore sighed again, this time with a slightly wistful expression on his aged face. "I am sorry for that, Harry. I should have checked in on you after leaving you there." Harry felt the deep stirrings of anger and hate bubbling to the surface but managed to push them away again. "I will agree to your terms. You are free to come and go when not required to be here, given the conditions that you will not skip

lessons without permission, that you do not slip in your studies, and that you give me your word that any time you need to take a trip and cannot be accompanied by your normal escorts, you will allow me to provide one of my own people to accompany you. However, you may not take any other students with you without my permission, on a case-to-case basis, of course.”

“Fair enough, Headmaster. I think the rest can wait until after the feast.”

“Thank you, Harry, for a most unusual afternoon. When you return to my office after the feast, the password shall have been set to 'Ice Mice' – just say it to the gargoyle in front of the staircase. Now, if you will follow me, I'll show you where to wait for the Sorting ceremony.” With that, Dumbledore strode out of his office, and Harry followed along behind him. For a man of advanced years, Dumbledore set an impressively vigorous pace.

“I'll leave you in here, Harry. Professor McGonagall will collect you when it's time for you to be Sorted. The first years will, of course, go first. You should expect her in about an hour.”

Dumbledore left Harry sitting in an empty classroom just down from the Great Hall. It appeared to be unused, possibly for some time, given the lack of furniture in good order. Most of the desks and chairs appeared old and in rough condition. Considering the decline of the population after the first rise of Voldemort and the reduction in student numbers at Hogwarts, Harry supposed it was likely that there were several unused classrooms by now. That might be useful later, but for the moment, it just gave Harry some peace and quiet to reflect. Pulling out his David Weber paperback book, he thumbed to his place holder and resumed reading.

“Mr Potter,” Professor McGonagall called from the doorway of the room he had been waiting in. “It's time for your Sorting. Come with me, please.”

Harry got to his feet, looking forward to the impending spectacle. He anticipated being gawked at, talked about, and treated



simultaneously like a rock star and a leper. Replacing his bookmark, he pocketed the volume and followed the professor down the hall.

It was sadly typical of the magical community to not know how to deal with an icon. The media had blown the events when he was only a year old out of proportion. Combine that mystery with the many random conspiracy theories on why he had declined to attend Hogwarts earlier, along with rumours of Dark Arts rituals, and everything became crazy. Why they even cared about what flavour of sweets or brand of dental floss he preferred was a bit beyond his ken, but it was his lot in life. There was little he could do about it – for now.

As Harry followed the Deputy Headmistress into the Great Hall, he was amused to find every eye riveted on him. It left him with the mild urge to do something theatrical, but knowing the way his life worked, he was sure something would happen without any deliberate effort on his part. He strolled to where McGonagall pointed him, toward a tall and uncomfortable looking wooden stool whereupon perched a dilapidated pointy hat. Harry distinctly recalled that he had seen both in the Headmaster's office earlier.

McGonagall whispered to him as they walked past the tables filled with gawking students. "It's tradition. When I call your name, you sit on the stool and place the Hat on your head. It will Sort you into your house." Moving slightly in front of the stool, she turned to Harry. Her face carefully neutral, she called out loudly, "Potter, Harry."

Excited whispering immediately filled the Great Hall. Why anyone was surprised he was there was beyond Harry, considering most people knew he was on the train after the drubbing he gave Malfoy and company. He was almost certain that others would have reported his Portkeying directly to the castle with Snape. Of course, the prominent absence of the professor and the three students that were involved with Harry could have been fuelling the speculation and whispers, but that was irrelevant.

Sitting on the stool, Harry dropped the Hat on his head. He waited good-naturedly for it to do whatever it was supposed to, although it seemed to be nothing to him. After a very long moment of tense

silence, the brim of the Hat opened and shocked everyone in the hall. "Errr, where are you, Mr Potter?" the Hat asked.

"You're on my head, so obviously I'm underneath you," Harry patiently replied.

"Really?" the Hat asked back.

"Something I can help you with?"

The Hat became quiet for nearly another full minute. During that time, Harry scanned the students and saw that they were perfectly silent, waiting intently to see what would happen next. Apparently no one had ever witnessed or heard of the Hat casually talking like this. Looking at the Head Table, he noticed that every single person at the table seemed to be in a mild state of shock – except one. Dumbledore alone seemed to be unperturbed, but he was instead slowly shaking his head from side to side as though hopelessly lost in his own back garden.

"Merlin!" the Hat exclaimed. "I can't find you at all. How is that?"

Harry shrugged whilst examining his nails again. "As I don't know how you work, I'm not really the best person to ask, now am I?"

"Have you had any Occlumency training?!" the Hat demanded.

"Quite." Harry idly pulled out the small book from under his robes and began turning to where he had left off reading. "Do let me know when you're ready to get on with this."

"Look, I've had Occlumens under me before – up to level three, I might add – and I've been able to read them just fine. In fact, I can see shields and the consciousness of people, but for some reason I can't see you. I don't suppose you'd lower your shields, would you?" The Hat seemed mildly depressed about the whole situation.

"Errr, since I don't really know you and can't see your brain either, why would I want to do a thing like that? I'm at level five, by the way." Harry felt his question was perfectly reasonable. Just because

everyone else was stupid enough to put a sentient and heavily enchanted object in control of their brain did not translate to his following the same pattern of blind faith. Having found his place in the book he was thumbing through, he resumed his reading from earlier that morning. He had yet to make much progress in the book. For some inexplicable reason, he somehow kept being interrupted.

“Level Five? Really? Hmmm. Right,” said the Hat. Opening the rip in its brim all the way, the hat yelled out, “CONFERENCE!”

Dumbledore looked surprised once again – a situation he was probably starting to find unpleasantly common today – and stood up. Walking down to the stool, he looked hesitantly at the hat. “Well, Floppy, what seems to be the problem?”

Floppy dropped the volume of its voice down to a near whisper before replying. “Albus, Mr Potter and I need to have a long talk. This could take hours. You need to start the feast whilst we chat.”

Dumbledore looked almost ready to cry, or perhaps curse, at this. “By the rules and regulations, the feast can't start until every student has been Sorted. Can't you just Sort him and talk later?” Harry was not quite certain, but he thought Dumbledore might even be starting to whinge faintly.

“Hmmm. That's fair, so long as we all agree it's a temporary Sorting. He'll be properly Sorted later. Does that work for you, Mr Potter?” Floppy seemed to be getting almost excited by this turn of events. “In the meantime, you'll be wearing me until you trust me enough to let me Sort you properly by letting me in your mind.”

“If that means I can go eat, then yes, let's do that. Do I get to call you Floppy?” It seemed a bit of a silly name for a hat, but since the Hat appeared to be sentient to some extent, who was he to complain? Harry was quite hungry and wanted to get something to eat immediately. If he waited much later, it would make his evening training more difficult. Much of the workout he needed to do would be rather unpleasant on a still-full stomach.

"Right then, you call me Floppy, and I'll announce your temporary Sorting. Any of the houses have a particular appeal to you, Mr Potter?" Floppy asked.

Truth be told, Harry felt no particular affinity to any of the houses, but he was going to have to choose one if he wanted to eat. "Err, it really doesn't matter. How about the one with the Weasleys? We were trying to talk about Quidditch earlier but got interrupted."

"That works." Floppy almost seemed to take a deep breath before it shouted out, "TEMPORARILY GRYFFINDOR!" Unlike the other students, there was no burst of applause for this. Most people, even the staff, were looking at each other in confusion over the disclaimer that the Sorting was "temporary," especially after the initial odd behaviour of the Hat.

Dumbledore looked at Harry and motioned him toward the Gryffindor table. "Congratulations, Mr Potter. Please join your new house for the feast."

Harry, with Floppy still on his head, strolled over to the Gryffindor table. As he approached, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Ron slowly stood and began clapping. Gradually the entire table was clapping, and the Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs soon joined in. The Slytherins were fairly universal in their glares.

"Not popular with the Slytherins after that train incident, are you?" Floppy asked quietly, slowly drooping down over Harry's right ear.

"M'eh," Harry said with indifference. Spotting an empty seat between Ron and Ginny, Harry dropped down into the spot with Ginny on his right side. Ron offered a half smile, and Ginny looked at him sympathetically for a moment, eyeing the Hat that was draped over his ear with a mixture of curiosity and irritation. Harry was almost certain she was muttering about the Hat under her breath.

As Dumbledore returned to the centre of the Head Table, he clapped his hands together once and announced in a loud voice, "Tuck in!"

Harry piled food on his plate, ignoring the many strange looks he was getting from everyone around him. Hermione, sitting across from him with Neville, looked ready to explode with questions and speculations. Harry smirked at her. "Anyone seen Snape or Malfoy?" he asked in a loud voice, a look of innocent inquiry on his face.

A zone of silence descended over the Gryffindor table at Harry's question. Everyone looked at him askance before they scanned the hall, looking for the missing people. Whispered speculations started up again, but at least the focus was off Harry for the moment.

"That was rather Slytherin of you, Mr Potter!" Floppy whispered. Ginny jerked back slightly, and Harry suspected she was the only other person to have heard that statement.

"Tell me, Floppy," Harry whispered back, casually pouring some juice for himself at the same time. "In all of your thousand-odd years of sitting on little kids' heads, did you ever not Sort someone into one of the four houses? I mean, doesn't that get old? I doubt most people really can be identified by such a trite idea as bravery, or cunning, or raw intelligence, or basic loyalty . . . most people should be a mix. Why can't you Sort someone into multiple houses? Or better yet, no house? Isn't there something more to life than a label? Could you just make up a new house and call it Floppyhat' or something?"

Ginny looked at Harry thoughtfully as Hermione leaned in closer, probably trying to hear the conversation accurately. Ron blissfully stuffed his face with food as fast as he could and was obviously paying attention to nothing else. Neville was watching Hannah with a slightly wistful expression on his face, seemingly lost in his own mind.

Harry would almost swear that Floppy chuckled. "Now that's an interesting question, Mr Potter."

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A/N:

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it

incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to Chreechree and cwarbeck. Thanks to Reg for Brit-picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and to Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded. Parakletos gave a thorough once-over for the re-editing process to be sure we missed nothing (or at least, as little as possible).

### Chapter 3: Declarations

With a noise that Harry would later swear sounded distinctly like a burp, Floppy turned into a sombrero big enough for three to get shade under. To complete the look, the sombrero was a garish red – as though it was mocking the house with whom Harry was currently sitting. Two long ties came down and wrapped themselves under his chin. A small tear opened up on the right strap near his ear. “You’re the first person to ever ask me about that, Mr Potter.”

Harry shuddered slightly, as everyone at the Gryffindor table stopped eating and stared at the Hat on his head. Laughter slowly started ringing out across the Great Hall, and next to him, Ginny choked on her pumpkin juice.

Slapping her back slightly harder than was strictly necessary, Harry gave her the evil eye before giving it up as a bad job. Harry pulled out his wand and turned his spoon into a moderate-sized mirror sitting on the table.

Staring closely at the reflection on his head, he let out a slow sigh. “You do realize no one here has been to Mexico other than you and me, right?”

Floppy made an inarticulate sound before twisting into itself and turning into a tri-corn hat similar to what colonial warriors wore during the 1700’s. Its colour was more orange than red.

“England lost the war with the American colonies. Hasn’t anyone told you?” Harry was almost certain he heard burping now.

The Hat almost seemed to melt before shimmering back into a blood-red bowler hat.

“All right, all right. There’s no need to imitate that idiot Fudge.”

Harry was acutely aware that Hermione was watching the Hat with slightly glazed eyes, a bit of shepherd’s pie slowly falling off the fork suspended halfway to her mouth. Ginny was giggling almost non-stop,

and Ron had finally given notice that he was aware of what was going on in the world around him by blinking owlshly.

With one last heave, Floppy made a rrrrrrrp! sound as it reverted back into a battered old wizard's hat, listing precariously over Harry's right ear. "What was the point, Mr Potter, of that little spectacle?" Floppy asked.

Harry paused to consider the question, absently returning his spoon to its normal state. Ginny was still giggling like mad, her eyes screwed shut, while Hermione was still staring with what Harry would swear was naked lust at the powerful magical artefact on his head. Ron seemed to wake up slightly, realizing that there was pudding on the table, and he resumed eating while glancing occasionally at Floppy. The redhead was most likely checking to see if the hat had turned any new tricks. Neville was rather passive, eating quietly and for the most part seeming to ignore Floppy, keeping a weather-eye on two redheaded blokes further down the table.

Harry reflected on what Floppy was trying to ask of him. Clearly the question was about something more than the surface appearance of the Hat. "Aside from the notion that people see or hear the label and make an association based on it? Bowler for Fudge and stuck-up idiots in general, the sombrero for hot days and lazy moments, that silly army hat for fighting, and the wizard hat for everything magical?"

Floppy seemed uninterested in his response. "Think about it, Mr Potter. The answer to your Sorting question is there."

Hermione leaned forwards and hissed, "How do you do that, Mr Floppy?"

Floppy twitched briefly. "Eh, who's that?" The tip of the Hat twisted around, almost like an antenna trying to tune in a weak signal. "Oh, Miss Granger. Do what? Change shape? Am I magical or not?" That seemed the definitive answer as far as the Hat was concerned, and no matter how many more questions she asked, Floppy had no other answers for Hermione.



Harry used the respite provided by Hermione's frustration to actually eat some of his meal while considering the possible meanings of Floppy's actions. Ginny had managed to get her giggles under control and was eating again, letting out random snickers with sidelong glances at Harry's head. Ron meanwhile appeared to be slowing down in his food-vacuuming manoeuvres.

Harry also realized that as most people finished their dinners, they were beginning to stare at him again. It was quite annoying, really, that no matter what he looked like, what he did, or where he did it, people in this world would always react to his name or his scar. Even the people he had been talking to on the train – the same ones around him now – initially reacted like adolescent fans, although by now they seemed to have got over the first shock. He was almost certain that he could slap his name on dragon dung, and it would sell faster than Honeydukes' Best Chocolate Bars – on sale now!

The whole concept of a sentient hat, with clearly unknown magical powers, changing shapes while adorning his head felt so typical of his life. He just seemed to blunder from one manic event to another when all he really wanted to do was sit back and relax somewhere with a good book or at least a decent historical programme on the telly. Of course, the fact that he just happened to also be the mysterious Boy-Who-Lived meant that he could never have such a simple life, assuming he stayed in the magical community. The idea of just transplanting his scar and hair upon some unsuspecting bystander and letting them deal with the idiocy was a temptation that he was unable to completely suppress.

Even the idea of just becoming someone else for a day....

Harry felt a moment of surprise, as though the proverbial light switched on in his brain.

Whipping his wand forwards, Harry drew an intricate pattern in the air, thrust the tip of his wand through the centre and said, "Tweet, Tweet!"

Hermione's mouth formed a silent 'O' as a nimbus of grey light radiated off of Harry's body and clothes, including Floppy. The absolute silence that descended around him let Harry know that his

Aura Silencing Charm was working just fine. Harry promptly ignored the rest of the people in the hall, closing his eyes and concentrating on his senses to let him know if there was danger.

“Gryffindor hasn’t always been known as the home for the brave, has it Floppy?” Harry knew the answer, but he was a trifle unclear how he knew.

“Very good, Mr Potter. As a matter of fact, no, it hasn’t.”

“You sing a song extolling the virtues of each house prior to the first years’ Sorting, as I understand it. Do you change the association with each house?”

“Slowly, yes. I can’t just up and say that this year Slytherins are brave and Hufflepuffs are cunning, now can I? It takes a longer view, Mr Potter.”

“The Hat is just a hat, regardless of shape or utility. The House is just a house, not some clique of the stated attribute. It’s a place to live, to meet people with similar values and hopefully grow a bit, but not where everyone is brave or cunning or some other label.” Harry felt the rightness of the statement, but there were many open questions. “So the stated Sorting – bravery, brains, loyalty, sneakiness – that’s just superficial – a cover to keep people from asking questions, isn’t it?”

“You might be on to something, Mr Potter.” Floppy almost sounded smug, although Harry was less than positive he could read meaning into the Hat’s speech patterns. For all he knew, Floppy was exasperated with his lack of intelligence and was just humouring him.

“Right, so that explains why someone as cunning as a flobberworm wound up in Slytherin. I fail to see how Malfoy could ever be thought of as sly, cunning, or sneaky. What with the stories I’ve heard over the years and his actions on the train...” Harry let his sentence taper off meaningfully.

“Yes, well, not everyone can be what they want to be, now can they, Mr Potter?”

“There’s more to this, I can feel it. Godric wasn’t known for his bravery, was he? Nor was Salazar some evil snake plotting to take over the world every night.” Harry knew this was a tangent, but it might help him resolve Floppy’s little puzzle. “Ideas change with time, and values change as well. As human beings, our perceptions of life evolve and our society is forced to adapt to fit the new standards... conflicts arise from the old battling the new....”

Harry felt like he was facing a brick wall. The answer was there, just on the other side, but he had no idea on how to approach it.

“I think that’s enough for now, Mr Potter. The answer will come to you. Just give it some time. You’ll get there in the end!” Floppy twirled his tip slightly. “I think you should return to your classmates, Mr Potter. They are growing somewhat alarmed at your lack of response to their questions and your most interesting display of magic.”

Harry opened his eyes quickly, and then immediately leaned back. Hermione was standing prominently, leaning over the table, and appeared to be about to hit him. Flicking his wand one more time, the glow dissipated and sound returned to normal. “What?” he asked the bushy-haired girl.

Hermione sat down sharply, blushing slightly. Across from Harry, Neville piped up, “She was going to smack you to see if you were okay. I tried to warn her not to, but once she gets an idea in her head....” Neville trailed off with a hesitant smile at Hermione.

Hermione’s blush deepened, and then she seemed to realise something. “There is no spell I’ve ever heard of that’s called Tweet, Tweet’, Harry! That’s not even close to Latin! What was that?”

Harry nodded to Neville, understanding that curiosity was Hermione’s driving force in life. He looked blandly back at Hermione. “Well, clearly, you haven’t been reading the right books, now have you?” Hermione’s eyes slowly widened at the implications of the innocuous question.

Before she could ask anything in response, two other redheaded boys that looked perfectly identical came up and leaned around her. “Ere, now, Hermy love, you can’t keep young Harry to yourself all night,” the one on the left said. Harry squinted slightly at the boy, trying to get an impression to tell him apart from his brother.

The other one on the right piped up, “Yeah, Hermy, we all need to talk to such a glowing inspiration of the Light.” He stood with an expression of slack-jawed, drooling hero worship on his face. Harry had seen similar expressions that unfortunately were genuine, but it was easy to spot the signs here of artistic imitation. Still, it was a good bit of acting, and he could feel the grin forming on his face.

“Too right, brother mine! Makes me all tingly inside knowing there’s such an illuminating figure around.” Shaking his head solemnly, the first redheaded boy looked up at the Head Table. “There’s only so much twinkling us poor students can take before we all run screaming for the outer darkness.” A long pause took place as the twins simply shook their heads in sorrow at each other.

“Oi! Manners, brother, manners! Introduce us!” The one on the right was now staring pointedly at Ron, who was looking puzzled.

Ginny reached around Harry and smacked Ron lightly on the back of his head. “They’re asking you to introduce them to Harry, Ron. How you even find the dinner table sometimes....” She rolled her eyes. “Fred,” she said, pointing to the one on the right, “and George,” now pointing to the one on the left, “are our brothers. I think we mentioned them on the train.” She then pointed to Harry. “This is Harry Potter. He wanted us to warn you not to prank him or try to pry his secrets out, or else he’ll fight dirty to get even.” She put on an angelic smile as she faced Harry. “Did I get that right, Harry?”

Fred and George exchanged evil grins while Harry felt like quietly leaving the room. Putting on his best poker face, Harry looked back at Ginny and said, “I think your halo is stuck around your ankle, Ginny.”

Ginny’s face flushed a dark red at being called out so directly and so smugly. Harry could tell payback would be coming later for that comment. “You might want to try that look on someone susceptible to

temporary insanity induced by batting eyelashes.” Harry smirked at her, daring her to do her worst as her flush approached the colour of her hair.

Turning back to Fred and George, Harry slowly looked them up and down. “Pranksters, eh?”

Fred leaned over with his hand extended. Harry could swear he saw a flicker of movement as the hand came closer but was uncertain as to what he saw. Ignoring the impression for the moment, Harry briefly shook hands with Fred, who merely smiled and said, “Pleased to meet you, young Harry. Although given the lovely shade of red our sister has become, I’m sorry to say this may be the last time I meet you as well. I think you’re about to be the Boy-Who-Got-Hexed-To-Death.”

It was George’s turn to lean over as Fred took his hand back. “Quite. It was a pleasure knowing you for a few moments, Harry. Do be sure your insurance is up to date, right? Ta Ta!”

The twins scampered back off to their end of the table while Harry ignored the fuming girl beside him. Ron and Neville, however, stared at Harry, somewhat horrified, and slowly edged away from him. Harry glanced at Ginny to see her eyes squinting dangerously, and he decided to go for broke.

Winking at her, he re-transfigured his spoon – this time into a halo – and cast an oscillating floating spell and random colour change spell upon it before setting it on her brow. He watched in amusement as the halo sat at a lovely forty-five degree angle a few inches above her head before it began slowly twirling, giving the impression of an angel who lost all rights to have a halo in the first place, as it repeatedly cycled from yellow to green to black.

Ginny’s eyes bulged, and Harry was certain the payback would be spectacular. She ripped the halo off of her head and furiously tried to reverse his magical modifications. Meanwhile, Ron and Neville actually fled to the other end of the table. This left two prime openings – one next to Harry and another across from him – which were

immediately filled with two pretty girls who introduced themselves directly.

“Hi, I’m Lavender... this is my friend, Parvati...” Both girls blushed slightly. “Welcome to Hogwarts, Harry!” Lavender’s voice oozed saccharine goop as she tossed her hair outrageously. Harry wondered what she would do if he called her on her posturing. Realising that he had one fuming girl on his right, he failed to see how it could get any worse with another one on his left, so he just jumped right in.

Harry adopted his best clinical voice. “Nice to meet you. I notice you keep flipping your hair over your shoulder. Did you know that’s been proven to be a clear sign of attraction and flirtation in attempt to win a date or even a mate?”

Lavender blinked once before smiling as if she held the world in her pocket. “Is it working?” she asked, leaning forwards slightly to enhance the effect of her feminine assets.

Harry decided it was time to really start messing with heads. “I don’t think so. Ginny doesn’t seem to be that interested in you. Have you tried flirting with Hermione yet?”

Dead silence met this statement. Lavender seemed to be stuck somewhere between horror and mortification. Parvati choked on her juice and coughed violently. Hermione looked like a deer caught in headlights, while Ginny had gone from a deep, angry red to ghostly pale in the blink of an eye.

Deciding it was time to exercise the better part of valour, he concluded by grabbing his goblet of pumpkin juice and stating blandly, “Well, then again, maybe it is working with Ginny. She’s certainly not angry with you for flirting, whereas she seems downright hostile to me. I’ll leave you girls to get better acquainted. Let me know how it goes.” Harry rose promptly yet walked casually back towards Fred and George, his senses on high alert, expecting a major assault on his person at any second.

Once he reached Fred and George – who were staring with admiration at Harry – he chanced a look back to see all four girls with their heads bent together, whispering furiously. Fast and crisp hand gestures frequently punctuated the discussion. Harry experienced a sinking sensation, realising that payback would not only be swift and vicious, it would be completely without any mercy at all. Fred whistled softly, causing Harry to look back at him.

“Brass ones, young Harry,” Fred said quietly. “You’ve got brass ones if you’re going to hack our sister off like that and just walk away.”

George nodded his head vigorously while Ron and Neville were once again trying to get as far away from Harry and whatever imminent violence he would soon be receiving. “Ruddy brilliant, but you are definitely going to be unhappy soon.”

“If she’s so good at scaring the crap out of people,” Harry asked, “why the hell is she wanting to learn to fight Muggle-style against fools like Malfoy?”

Fred and George wound up with poker faces before Harry could realise he had crossed some invisible line. “Asked you about that, did she?” Fred inquired in all seriousness. Harry just shrugged in response. “You going to teach her?” Fred continued. Harry shrugged again. “We three need to talk later, Harry, before you decide anything. Clear?”

Harry took a long moment to stare at Fred and George individually and nodded slowly as it became apparent just how serious they were over the topic.

“Excellent. Now, since they appear to be delaying your imminent and no doubt painful doom until after the feast, why don’t you join us?” Fred rapidly oscillated back to being the extreme, jovial extrovert.

George pushed the fellow next to him down a bit, and Harry sat down beside him. While everyone was shifting places and trying to make a little more room, Harry casually swapped his goblet of pumpkin juice for George’s. After all, if one of them had done something during that brief flicker of movement, it was only fair that they pay the price for

trying to prank him. Harry made a slight production out of reaching for his goblet before raising it to Fred and George and offering a toast. "To payback in all its forms, especially with redheads!" Fred and George both laughed as they took up their goblets, smirked at each other, and then clanked them together with Harry's before all three took a long drink.

George promptly turned into a duck and started quacking at everyone. Fred took one look at George and burst out laughing, while Harry just smiled broadly. "Put it in my pumpkin juice, did you?" he asked with a smirk.

Fred looked surprised that Harry had made the connection, before looking back at George. "It'll wear off in about two minutes. You realize you just pranked us, don't you?"

Harry went for his own angelic look. "Me? Prank you? I was just offering your own prank back to you. I didn't actually arrange anything." Harry batted his eyes a bit as he finished, causing Fred to laugh some more. Both watched George hop up on the table and waddle along its length, irritating people by poking his fat bill into everyone's drink. With a short puff of exploding feathers, George reverted back to human form halfway down the table, coincidentally close to Ginny and her planning partners.

Scrambling back to Fred and Harry, George leaned in and whispered urgently, "Harry, you might want to consider vacating Hogwarts right after the feast and saving yourself a lot of pain and public humiliation. Those girls are downright evil." Shuddering slightly, he stared at Fred for a moment before looking back at Harry. "Right. I believe young Harry here needs to learn not to mess with Weasleys. You've got our sister plotting against you, and you've pranked us. You do realize this is a declaration of war, do you not?"

Fred leaned over and finished the challenge. "You can surrender now and grovel at our feet here in the Great Hall, because when we're done with you, you'll be doing it in nothing but your underwear while wearing a sign proclaiming our greatness. Choose quickly!" Harry carelessly noticed that all the people sitting around Fred and George were suddenly looking decidedly nervous.



“Right, so when I win,” Harry responded, “you’ll come in here on your knees in your sister’s underwear, swear undying loyalty to me, and also confess to finding Snape ruggedly handsome enough to warrant a torrid one-night stand.”

Fred and George almost fell out of their seats laughing. “Right! You’re on!” both exclaimed in some twisted form of stereo sound. “Rules?”

Harry paused to think over the last few prank wars he had been involved with. “First, nothing that is untested and could have unknown side effects. Second, no prank that lasts more than twenty-four hours. Third, no prank that prevents one of us from defending ourselves.”

Fred and George nodded at this. “Excellent!” Fred said while George bobbed his head in concurrence. “I say we keep going until one side capitulates. No point in keeping score.” George agreed to this idea as well.

Harry looked back and forth before grinning evilly. “One other clause – we need to be able to call a truce period of not more than forty-eight hours. Each truce period will have to be agreed to by all of us, which means we have to provide a basically honest explanation of why it’s needed.”

Fred and George nodded again, but this time George responded. “Good idea, Harry. We’ll need those truces during Quidditch games, since we’re on the team.” Harry shrugged, and Fred and George each extended a hand.

Harry shook each in turn and then motioned them closer. A wave of whispered conversations suddenly shot down the table as everyone rapidly discovered the declared prank war. “I need to declare this weekend a truce weekend. In fact, I’ve got a little business proposition for you where we can mutually benefit. I need something done here without my name on it. You guys will make a tidy little sum, get a bit of decent publicity out of it, and it won’t take up much of your time. Interested?”

Fred looked at George, who looked back at Fred, and then both turned to stare at Harry. "When we talk later, you'll fill us in. Then we decide. For now, conditional agreement."

"Fair enough," Harry replied. "Now, explain to me why your entire family is scared to death of your sister. She seemed quite timid on the train."

Fred chuckled and was obviously preparing to lay out the basic facts of life to Harry when Dumbledore rose to his feet and clapped his hands together to obtain everyone's attention. Floppy sat up a bit straighter and pointed his tip towards the aging Headmaster. "Later!" George hissed into Harry's ear. Harry just nodded while keeping his eyes on the supposed leader of the Light side in times of darkness.

"Welcome back, one and all, to another exciting year at Hogwarts. As usual, I must make a few start-of-term announcements. First, your Heads of House will be informing the Quidditch captains of the yearly schedule, so tryouts will begin at the discretion of each captain. Second, I feel I must remind all students, especially people here for the first time," Dumbledore stated while staring straight at Harry, "that the Forbidden Forest is very dangerous and, therefore, is off limits to all students. If you enter, you may not come out alive, and there are a great many things worse than death."

Returning his gaze to the rest of the students, Dumbledore paused to sip of his drink before continuing. "Mr Filch has asked me to once again remind everyone that magic should not be used in corridors between classes, and he has expanded, yet again, the list of forbidden items. I suggest you consult the full list outside his door if you are unsure whether any of your cherished belongings should not be found in your possession."

"As you may notice, we have two vacant seats at the Head Table tonight. I wish to assure you that Professor Moody has agreed to return for his second year of teaching, but he is caught up in some Auror paperwork from events earlier today and will not be in the castle until after curfew this evening. Professor Snape has similarly been detained," at which point Harry started chuckling while Fred and George shot him confused looks, "and should be returning in a few

days. I hope he will be back in time for classes on Monday, but we will post announcements if alternate arrangements for Potions classes are required for the start of lessons next week.”

Dumbledore paused once more to take another sip of his drink while many quiet conversations started again, most speculating about the location of the Slytherin Head.

“I would like to welcome Harry Potter to our ranks once again, but his arrival requires some additional information for each of you. As some of you have no doubt noticed, Harry does not wear a traditional school uniform. Indeed, we are very lucky to have with us, for the first time in over two hundred years, a young man on the path to becoming a full War Mage.” Dumbledore hesitated, unsure of what level of reaction such a statement might generate, but from the complete silence and somewhat baffled looks, it appeared that most families had long since forgotten about the discipline.

“You will note that his outfit consists of robes in simple black, with two silver emblems on his shoulders. The mace on the left shoulder represents a sworn oath to the War Mage training and values. This oath is both magically binding and recognized around the world. It is a most difficult and strenuous training regimen, and there has not been a new member sworn into their ranks for over one hundred and fifty years now. I suggest that those curious to know more should consult the library’s historical section, where you will find many references on what this lifelong oath entails. Of much greater significance, however, is the fact that once a War Mage has been trained sufficiently, they carry on the right shoulder a dagger emblem. This emblem symbolises their legal right to respond to any attack upon their person and their right to use lethal force in response to anything they consider to be life-threatening.”

Dumbledore gravely looked over the student body which was sitting in silence, many now openly staring at Harry. For his part, Harry tried to project bored indifference to all the attention he was getting. He quietly sat while Floppy’s tip slowly rotated in a circle. It had been a very long time indeed since he allowed something as trivial as unwanted attention to affect his external behaviour.

“I must repeat that warning. Every person in this room must understand that when a War Mage is entitled to wear both symbols, as Mr Potter is, any attack – even in jest – may be seen and responded to as life-threatening, justifying the use of lethal force in retaliation.” Dumbledore again paused to let the full implications of his statement sink into everyone. Harry could suddenly feel several eyes on him, as Fred and George frowned heavily. Glancing back up the length of the table, he could almost swear that Ginny’s evil eye was actually working on him. The Slytherin table seemed mostly indifferent to the comment, while many of the other students looked slightly nervous.

“The only exception to this is when you are in classes with Mr Potter and a teacher specifically asks Mr Potter to participate in a class exercise, and all of you are following the professor’s instructions. If you go beyond the confines of the approved exercise, be prepared for consequences. Each of you should be aware that his use of force, be it magical or physical, is fully permitted under the law. Mr Potter also has the right to detain someone who is acting against the law and remand them to the Aurors for questioning, and, if necessary, prosecution. In many ways, Mr Potter resides outside the law and is immune to many of the normal procedures. Again, I refer any of the more curious amongst you towards the library for more information. At this time, there are no other War Mages in training, nor are you likely to encounter any, so I see no need to continue elaborating on this topic. Rest assured that Mr Potter is not someone you wish to trifle with.”

Dumbledore quaffed from his goblet, letting conversations pick up once again. He looked at his staff, pleased with their lack of reaction to this news. Of course, Harry had required the Headmaster to inform his entire staff of the situation upon submitting his letter accepting enrolment at Hogwarts, so they should be used to the idea by now.

“I must now also relate an important piece of news which many of you will be disturbed to hear. In a unanimous decision, the Heads of House have agreed that any student found assaulting another without due cause will be summarily expelled from Hogwarts and have their wand snapped. If it is deemed appropriate and the wounded parties involved so wish it, we will also remand the offending students to the

Aurors for prosecution and trial. In accordance to this decision, Mr Malfoy, Mr Crabbe, and Mr Goyle have been expelled from Hogwarts, and their wands have been snapped. Each is currently in the custody of the Aurors. Mr Crabbe and Mr Goyle are facing assault charges, and Mr Malfoy is facing multiple attempted murder charges. Due to these and other events, Professor Snape is presently dealing with the Aurors and will be returning to us when the initial issues have been resolved.”

Harry had to applaud the Headmaster for the way in which he could tell the complete truth yet simultaneously lie so beautifully. Any real understanding of a situation was dependent upon the truth, but the skew in understanding centred on how the truth was told.

While Harry was not expecting a standing ovation at the news regarding Malfoy, at the very least he had anticipated some show of gratitude considering the bevy of rumours he had heard both on the train and prior to arriving at the platform that morning. As it was, he was not prepared for the expressions of raw fear on most of the students’ faces. Many of them glanced nervously at the Slytherin table, obviously trying to disassociate themselves from these events. Meanwhile, most Slytherins glared at Harry with pure, undiluted hatred, and it seemed abundantly clear that Dumbledore’s warning would be tested many times over the weekend.

Apparently noticing the tension in the room, Dumbledore brought the announcements to a rapid close. “Now that we have all been properly fed and informed, everyone enjoy your weekend. Prefects, please see to the first-year students. Mr Potter, please accompany me back to my office, where we will discuss today’s events.”

Harry nodded briefly at Fred and George before rising and walking with Dumbledore back to his office. He had the sinking feeling that the factions that would be arrayed against him would doubtless fail to heed the Headmaster’s warnings. The likely result would see the hospital wing becoming a hotbed of subversive activity aimed at eliminating his presence from Hogwarts with all due haste.

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A/N:

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to cwarbeck and Chreechree. Thanks to Reg and others for their Brit-picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

## Chapter 4: Harsh Reality

After the Headmaster finished placing wards around the room again, Harry and Dumbledore settled into their seats. Immediately upon completing the ward work, Dumbledore had asked a house-elf to bring tea for the two of them. Harry then watched as the headmaster gathered himself and overtly contemplated the situation. Breaking the silence, Dumbledore looked over his cup at Harry and started the discussion. "You know that Voldemort will now be aware of exactly where you are since you have come here, don't you?"

Harry shrugged. "He always knows more or less where I am, in terms of geographical region – on the Isles, on the continent, in Asia, that sort of thing. We'll get to why in a bit. Does it concern you?"

Dumbledore stared out through the window near his phoenix before looking back at Harry. "It will bring more attention to Hogwarts, but after the events with the Triwizard Tournament last year, I am not overly concerned. I spent a great many weeks the prior summer strengthening and reworking the wards on this school. It still remains a major target of his."

Irritated, Harry looked Dumbledore straight in the eye. "We both know Voldemort couldn't care less about Hogwarts as a building, or even as a school."

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "How are you aware of this?"

Harry smirked and simply raised his left eyebrow. "My mentors and I worked it out some time ago."

Dumbledore stood and paced behind his desk for a few minutes before clearing his throat. Harry felt that the conversation was really about to begin, so he put his cup down on the tray and gave his complete attention to the Headmaster.

"I spent much of dinner contemplating the mutual oaths we have sworn, Harry. I still feel it was rash and that we will end up regretting this before long, but I think there is a way we can work within the oaths and still have time to do what we need to do. Do you realize

that I could sit here and talk to you for nearly one year without interruption and still not cover all the details of what I know about Voldemort?"

Harry looked back at him in mild surprise. "You know him this well? And yet he still is among the living? I find this hard to believe."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Soon, you will understand how I know so many details. What I want to discuss first is our pact. I have come to the conclusion that so long as we both agree to – shall we say – delay relaying some information, the Unbreakable Vows should not be triggered." As Harry started to look angry, Dumbledore hurried on. "For example, I think it more pertinent to discuss his major background points rather than what he had for breakfast on 15 September 1942, don't you?"

Harry checked his rising anger to think about this. Clearly, Dumbledore knew exactly what Voldemort had for breakfast in 1942, which spoke volumes on how much the Headmaster really knew about his opponent. That said, Harry felt that they should probably start with the major points that were most relevant and deal with the more minor details later on. As far as Harry could tell, it was either that or just agree never to discuss mindless trivia at all. "Alright, Headmaster, I see the point you're making. How do we go about this?"

Dumbledore sat back down and raised his wand before him. "I hereby declare that, with the agreement of Harry Potter, I shall limit the scope of our conversation to the major points of Voldemort's history and related prophecies until our next agreed upon meeting." Dumbledore looked expectantly at Harry.

Harry shrugged before raising his own wand. "I hereby declare that I agree to limit the discussion with Albus Dumbledore to only the major points of Voldemort's history and related prophecies until our next agreed upon meeting."

Dumbledore nodded at Harry. "All we need to do is substitute the relevant bit of what we're going to be covering at the beginning of each meeting, and we will both be fine. The key here is that you and I



both feel that we have done as we stated, for if one of us has doubts that we were told the full information as related to the topic, the consequences of breaking the oath will kick in shortly. For this reason, we need to ask each other if we are satisfied with the discussion before we end the meeting.”

“I understand and I agree to this,” Harry said. “The major highlights and the prophecies are enough for tonight. Prophecies always tend to make me cranky for hours after learning of them anyway. I won't be fit for company by the time we get through with them.”

Dumbledore nodded again. “Very well, Harry. Let us begin. I trust you are familiar with a Pensieve? Good. I prepared some time ago various critical memories of interacting with Tom Marvolo Riddle – ah, you already know his true name, excellent! –and we shall begin with his early history....”

Harry was fascinated as he travelled through a web of stories, facts, insights, and Pensieve memories detailing the incredible life of Tom Riddle, more recently known as Voldemort.

Harry could empathize with many of the points of Riddle's early life, yet he could not agree with Riddle's views on magic, power, and the rights that it may or may not convey. Floppy would twitch periodically during their discussion, but the Hat never spoke. After detailing the return visit where Riddle asked to become DADA professor, Dumbledore proceeded to give a very broad overview of the first war, the major battles, and basic tactics each side used.

Following his narrative, Dumbledore fell silent for quite some time, gazing steadily at Harry. Harry knew the conversation, which had already been quite dark, was about to become even more unpleasant.

“It is because of my pride and arrogance, Harry, that your parents are dead.”

That simple statement was the equivalent of a bomb going off in Harry's psyche. His already barely suppressed anger with the Headmaster rose like a snake, screaming for immediate retribution. Harry shot to his feet, his magic control so erratic his aura manifested

itself in a glowing, shimmering pattern. Harry's wand was raised, dangerously close to the Headmaster's face. He was shaking with rage and fighting to regain control over his emotions.

Breathing heavily, he slowly ground out from clenched teeth, "You. Will. Explain. Now."

Dumbledore looked sadly at Harry before pouring both of them another cup of tea. He then pulled a small bottle of Ogden's Finest Firewhisky from his desk and dispensed a generous portion into each cup. Keeping one eye on a still shaking Harry, Dumbledore took a short sip and slowly spoke.

"We were in the middle of the First War against Voldemort. Hogwarts was in need of a new instructor for Divination, and I was at the Hog's Head in the nearby town of Hogsmeade. My brother runs that pub, and I was using an upstairs room there for an interview. Previously, we had met there with some of our spies, as it was better on their part to not be seen entering or leaving Hogwarts."

Dumbledore sighed again before telling the most damning part. "I collapsed the wards after the last meeting, and Sibyll Trelawney arrived for her appointment some fifteen minutes later. I doubted she had any real ability, so I failed to take any precautions to ward the room. She suddenly fell into a trance and gave a prophecy. A spy for Voldemort overheard the first part of the prophecy, Harry, and this information led to the attack on your family. This prophecy is the reason they were targeted, the spy the reason Voldemort found out, and my own arrogance that nothing critical could possibly happen was why anything was revealed in the first place."

Harry managed to gradually force his rage back into its customary box and sat stiffly, his breathing heavy. Reaching out, he blindly took a long swallow straight from the Firewhisky bottle before picking up the cup of tea. He nodded once at the Headmaster, telling him with his eyes to continue his tale.

Dumbledore tapped the side of his Pensieve, saying, "This prophecy foretold your birth, Harry. Observe." The ghostly figure of a woman

rose from the surface of the Pensieve and spoke in an unearthly voice.

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...  
Born to those who have thrice defied Him,  
born as the seventh month dies...  
And the Dark Lord will mark him as His equal,  
but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...  
And either must die at the hand of the other  
for neither can live while the other survives...  
The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be  
born as the seventh month dies

The figure sank back into the silvery depths of the Pensieve.

Harry rose and paced the room for a few minutes before sitting back down and drinking his tea. "The signs are apparent. I understand the implications. Was I the only candidate?"

Dumbledore shook his head briefly. "No. Neville Longbottom could also have been the one with the power, yet Voldemort marked you."

Harry nodded absently while looking at the phoenix. It trilled quietly, helping Harry settle back to a more even keel. "You said at the beginning of this meeting there were prophecies, plural. How many are there for tonight?"

Dumbledore held up four fingers. Harry inclined his head and motioned for Dumbledore to continue.

The Headmaster looked somewhat nervously at Harry, the first palpable emotion he had displayed this evening. "Harry," he hesitantly said, "the major thing I have not told you is that Severus Snape was the spy who overheard the first part of the prophecy and subsequently told it to Voldemort. Later, when Voldemort announced his intention to attack your family, Severus came to me and revealed everything. He indicated that he wanted to cross over to our side, and through his warning we placed both your family and the Longbottoms under the Fidelius Charm. Severus harboured an intense hatred of your father, Harry, but he owed your father a life debt, and this was

how he chose to try to repay it. While it kept Voldemort away for a few weeks, in the end it was the betrayal by the escaped convict Sirius Black that led to that fatal night. I trust Severus with my life, Harry, which is why I did not wish to tell you this information or see you press charges against him. Severus feels that his life debt was not paid, and he now owes it to your father to protect you. This, however, does not make him feel kindly towards you. After today, I fear that the best that might be said regarding your relationship with Severus will be that your hatred and desire to kill him is equally reciprocated.”

Harry snorted into his tea cup, as the feelings of hate and anger stirred again. “You will soon learn some information that may cause you to think otherwise, Headmaster. I don't trust him, and after this revelation, I'll be happy to greet him in hell as long as he gets there first. Do continue.”

“When we arrived at the scene of destruction at your house that night, Harry, I had to make an instant decision. It was clear to me that Voldemort was not, in fact, dead, although the Ministry refused to hear my warnings. When I determined that the scar on your forehead was the result of a failed Killing Curse, I conducted many tests to try to understand how you had survived. Further tests suggested that it was caused by the selfless, willing sacrifice of your mother for you. There is a rare type of blood magic warding that can be performed, and I knew that if my suspicions were correct – if I were to place you with blood relatives of your mother – you would remain safe from any direct attack by magical means. Alternatively, I could place you with a magical family, and you would likely have grown up with an inflated head full of propaganda and would have been a puppet of the Ministry for your entire life. Those were dark times, Harry, and you were the only beacon of light that was available. The Ministry would have used you in a heartbeat, and I feared your childhood would have been terrible. You were technically a ward of the state, and I knew I must act before the Ministry could. So I decided to place you with the only blood relatives you had, those of your mother, and sealed a Blood Ward between you and your Aunt Petunia to keep you safe. They became your legal guardians, leaving the Ministry powerless. I then turned my attention to discovering where Voldemort had fled.”

Harry was distinctly displeased, and he once more had to work hard to keep his anger in check. When he allowed himself to experience the emotions, what little he remembered of his life at the Dursleys still left him in a towering rage. The man in front of him had sentenced him to that life and, therefore, to the life that followed, and he was not about to casually forgive the man for his actions.

While Dumbledore was unaware of the struggle Harry waged with his emotions, the phoenix apparently was not. The beautiful creature of the Light flew onto Harry's shoulder where it softly trilled a song of comfort and hope and strength, helping to keep Harry's mind mostly clear of troubling emotions.

After refilling his cup, Dumbledore resumed his narration. "Over the subsequent ten years, I chased rumours of Voldemort. I spent time in Albania, Austria, Russia, and the Balkans looking for him. I never found him, but several times I found signs of his passage. I even unearthed some signs that he might have been in England as recently as four years ago. Before today, my best intelligence placed him somewhere in the forests of Albania, reportedly without a body yet possessing whatever life forms he could to continue a bitter, powerless existence. Every break I can arrange to take from this school I use to continue my search. I know he is out there, biding his time, waiting to strike and come back more powerful than ever. Earlier, you indicated that he has already regained his body. I am most anxious to hear what you have to tell me. Before that, however, let me share the other three prophecies that I believe are of immediate importance." Dumbledore paused to stir the Pensieve in front of him again.

"Approximately two years after you were born, Trelawney again made a legitimate prophecy. After her initial interview, I spent some months constructing special wards that would detect the change in her mind as she entered the Seer's Vision and would log any predictions disclosed during the trance. This was the first prophecy I recorded by that means. I am not entirely certain but suspect that it relates to you or Voldemort." Dumbledore tapped the Pensieve, and the lone figure of Trelawney straightening an empty classroom rose above the

surface. Her head suddenly shot back and her disembodied voice filled the room.

Her tears of blood and pain set fire to the world...

Her fire burns all who would touch it...

The Chosen One must be judged by the eternal fire...

The Dark Lord must have the fire to live...

The sky weeps at Her cry of loss and pain...

Dumbledore looked carefully at Harry. "Clearly, this may not apply to you and Voldemort, but it is highly likely that it does. You are likely the Chosen One, and we know the Dark Lord is Voldemort. The rest of this is unclear, except that both you and Voldemort must have whatever this woman possesses – you to win, Voldemort to live. If taken in the context of the first prophecy, it seems likely that if Voldemort obtains this woman, you will die at his hand, whereas if you find her and whatever artefact she has judges you worthy, then you will win. While I suspect this, I cannot say this is definite. As always, be cautious interpreting any prophecy, Harry."

Harry nodded in agreement, feeling that the first prophecy was quite useless except to tell him what he already knew, and this prophecy – if it was about him at all – was even more useless.

"Trelawney made the next prophecy two years ago, towards the end of the school year. I feel this relates to Voldemort but do not know how it applies to him." For the third time, Dumbledore tapped the Pensieve and summoned the figure of Trelawney, sitting at her desk and marking papers. Ink smudged her weary forehead. Suddenly her head flew back, and that familiar voice emerged again.

It will happen tonight...

The Dark Lord lies alone and friendless, abandoned by his followers...

His servant has been chained these twelve years...

Tonight, before midnight...

The servant will break free and set out to rejoin his master...

The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant's aid,  
greater and more terrible than ever he was...

Tonight...

Before midnight...

The servant...  
Will set out...  
To rejoin...  
His master...

As Dumbledore prepared to resume his discussion, he paused while Harry fought down laughter. Before long, Harry gave in and laughed heartily for a moment. "Too right, she was, too right. He's worm food now, but he did rejoin his master. You'll find out when it's my turn, do go on."

Dumbledore regarded Harry's ostensibly peculiar reaction and then flicked his Pensieve one last time. "This final prophecy was delivered to me in this office while reading your first letter informing me of your coming to Hogwarts for this school year. I won't even pretend to know what it really means beyond the obvious possible references to Voldemort as terrible and vengeful." Trelawney appeared sitting in front of the Headmaster as Harry was right now, with tea cups in nearly the same locations. Her head shot back, and the voice he was coming to loathe floated again in the room.

He comes...  
He walks among us again...  
He comes wrapped in blood and hatred...  
Fear His power, Tremble at His price...  
The world will shatter before His battle...  
The choice must be made anew...  
The pit of darkness yawns yet eternal...  
His wrath will consume us all...  
The Chosen One must find the light, 'ere we all burn...  
He comes...

Dumbledore sat back and tented his fingers, much as he had earlier in the day. The phoenix left Harry's shoulder and flew over to the Headmaster's, singing a song of love and redemption. Harry smiled absently at the Headmaster before nodding at the bird. "A lovely specimen. I've only ever seen one other, and that from a distance."

Dumbledore inclined his head. "Yes, Fawkes here is my old friend, and seeing a phoenix these days is a rare event. Now, I believe that,

to the best of my ability, I have covered the major events of the past and the prophecies that are the most immediately relevant to your particular situation. So I ask you, now, are you satisfied with my information?"

Harry nodded slowly. "Yes, I think I am – for tonight. That was... quite a lot of information to take in. However, I think I can fill in some of the gaps for you on more recent events." Harry refilled his cup and idly contemplated whether it was a bottomless pot of tea. After looking around rather obviously, Dumbledore gestured to a small facility just around the corner where Harry could take care of his needs. When Harry returned to his seat, he leaned back, far from Dumbledore, yet relaxed in posture.

"First, I feel I should tell you that I had to kill your Professor Quirrell when I ran into him during the winter holidays some four years ago." Dumbledore sat up straight at this information but made no comments.

"I have an ability that you have likely heard of – I have an overabundance of conduits in my eyes. I can, therefore, see magical signatures and magic being cast. You are familiar with this?"

Harry waited until Dumbledore nodded briefly.

"A couple of my mentors and I ran into Quirrell while Christmas shopping in Diagon Alley. You never heard of my presence because I always travel well disguised. Quirrell was coming out of Knockturn Alley when I saw a massive Dark aura around his head. After a quick discussion, we followed him back to a small cottage in the woods near Sussex, confronted him, and found the spirit of Voldemort embedded in the back of his head. I'm afraid we didn't wait around for a long discussion with His Vileness, and I simply put a Reducto curse across Quirrell's throat. Voldemort was less than pleased by the development, as you might imagine, but we persuaded him to move along sharply. He was rather reluctant to let us capture him, despite our offer that we would be quick about it." Harry smirked slightly when Dumbledore's eyebrows crept near his receding hairline. "I do so apologize for killing one of your Professors. I shall try not to make a habit of it."



Harry paused to take a drink of his tea. "I must also confess to being part of the reason why Lucius Malfoy no longer uses his cane for strictly cosmetic purposes." Yawning slightly at the late hour and from the prior night's lack of sleep, Harry continued his terse summation of recent events. "We were hunting down a particularly nasty Dark Arts text and found ourselves in Borgin and Burkes about three years ago. It was towards the end of August, I think. Anyway, that prat and his malodorous son were there arguing with Borgin while we waited for service. I recognized a tantalizingly familiar Dark aura leaking out of his coat pocket, so my mentors waylaid him in the alley. His son was Obliviated, as was Lucius, so they don't know the exact details, but we recovered a very Dark artefact: the school diary of one Tom Marvolo Riddle. After conducting experiments for the better part of a year spent, we discovered who Tom really was and made the most disturbing find of all: that diary was a Horcrux, one created expressly to return Riddle to a new body by draining the life of another wizard or witch."

Dumbledore had a look of horror on his face as he stared at Harry. "A Horcrux?"

"Unfortunately. That tells us why he survived when the Killing Curse failed. What it doesn't tell us is how many, because he's obviously created more than one." Harry smiled thinly at Dumbledore. "That, combined with the events this past summer, is why I am here, Headmaster. I need to know what you know, so we can do something a bit more permanent about His Scaliness."

"Scaliness?"

"Oh, right. The rebirth. We'll get there, but for now, he looks like a half-snake, half-man abomination in gene splicing. I take it you know as well as I do why he opted for a new form that most probably has a lower than normal body temperature." Dumbledore nodded briefly as he sat back again in his chair, looking somewhat resigned to what was coming next.

"About that prophecy concerning his servant... I'll spare you the details for now, we'll talk about it in depth later, but we caught Peter

Pettigrew crawling around in his Animagus form on the continent probably a few months before that prophecy was made. We literally kept him chained up, trying to drain any useful information from him. He escaped, in all likelihood on the same night that prophecy was made, the ruddy bugger. We had a couple of incidents that night and somehow, in the confusion, he broke free and disappeared.” Harry frowned a bit at the thought of Pettigrew getting away due to their carelessness. They had been tracking down two suspected former Death Eaters and had been planning to make a strike on their headquarters when they found themselves under attack. It made Harry regret ever saving the sorry rat from his mentors' fury when they discovered his real identity.

“Since we suddenly knew Sirius Black was innocent, we busted his arse out of Azkaban. And no, I won't tell you how, since you'd be obligated to report it, and then they'd fix the problem. Anyway, Sirius is under my protection now and, until we can prove his innocence, he will remain safely hidden. After the nightmare of Pettigrew's escape, we started tracking his good-for-nothing arse down. We were very close to catching him two summers ago, but he gave us the slip at Malfoy Manor. As you and I both know, that's not someplace to enter if you want to see the sunshine ever again.”

Harry was too tired to be as angry as he usually was when he thought of how close they had come to nabbing Pettigrew that day. He really needed to find a way to permanently inhibit an Animagus from transforming. It was just too hard to spot a rat in the middle of a big grassy field that had never seen a mower.

“We're not sure exactly what happened, but all the signs point to Pettigrew and Malfoy deciding the time was right for the Triwizard Tournament to be revived. We believe it was the foundation of a plan to keep both you and the Ministry completely focused on the political and social situation with the international spotlight on Hogwarts. In effect, it was perfect – it kept both of the main opposition groups that Voldemort needed to get around nailed to the floor in one place. All it took was Lucius lubricating the right people with some Galleons, and suddenly it seemed like everyone had the same idea at the same time. No one thought Voldemort was really alive, so no one was actively on guard. You all fell perfectly into his plans.”

Harry took a long swallow of his tea before placing the empty cup back on the desk. He felt that if he had any more of the damn drink he would explode.

“While you all were prancing around and dealing with the press, eventually celebrating the victory of that Diggory kid, we were trying to keep tabs on all the known suspected Death Eaters. It was clear they were planning something major, and it looked like it was going to culminate on the same night as the third task.”

Harry stopped to pour himself a cup full of Firewhisky. “We had caught wind of Pettigrew that day.” Harry looked back out the window for a moment. “My favourite mentor - your former partner - and I ran across him, seemingly by accident. We followed him to a town called Little Hangleton, where we planned to capture him and find out what the hell was going on.”

Harry took a healthy mouthful of Firewhisky from his cup.

“It was an ambush. We were completely set up. Lucius and Nott were waiting, and Pettigrew turned on us when we least expected it. It was a short fight since we were not fully prepared and had expected nothing in the middle of a Muggle village, surrounded by Muggles.” Harry finished his Firewhisky and walked over to the window.

“That was the moment when Nicolas Flamel died. I was knocked unconscious right after watching him get killed.” Harry put his hands out, feeling the rough stone of the window embrasure, the smooth cool glass, the weathered wood holding the panes in place. “I woke as Lucius, Nott and Pettigrew were conducting a ceremony to bring back Voldemort. Lucius tossed in a bone from Riddle's Muggle father, and Pettigrew chopped his hand off as flesh of the servant. Nott used my blood – forcibly taken – to bypass the protection that my mother may, or may not, have given me when she gave up her life in order to save mine.” Harry could see the events that night clearly in his mind.

“When Voldemort stood proud in his new and ugly-as-sin carcass, all of the Dark Marks on his servants' arms became crystal clear instead of the indistinct blob shape they had been in the intervening years. It

was obvious to anyone with the Mark that their master was back and was ready to kick some arse.” Harry turned to look at Dumbledore. “I saw Snape's mark earlier. It's just as clear as all the others. He knows, old man. He's known since that night that Voldemort is back.”

Albus stared at his desk, an expression of immeasurable weariness on his face. Harry turned back to the window before finishing. “He wanted to demonstrate his power over me, so we fought. He didn't know that I had been in War Mage training for a few years and was surprised by how well I fought back. Prior Incantatem took effect, and during that my other mentors arrived. It was a hell of a fight, Headmaster, a hell of a fight. Voldemort and most of his followers got away. Pettigrew bled to death during the fight from cutting off his hand in the resurrection ceremony. I guess Voldemort wasn't all that thankful to have a bit of rat in his new body. Unfortunately for Sirius, Pettigrew's body also got reduced to ashes when a stray Incendio caught it.”

Harry could feel the hatred simmering inside of him. It was distant, quiet for the moment, but still present. Cleaning out his tea cup, he tapped his wand to his temple and extracted the memory of that night in Little Hangleton. “Here's a copy of the ceremony. You might see something we overlooked.”

Harry stretched for a moment before looking back at the Headmaster. “That was the end. We all knew it. The cat-and-mouse game we'd been playing was just not working. That's why I'm here. I'm pissed, I'm ready to kill some people, and I need to know more than I do.” Harry looked hard into Dumbledore's eyes. “I've killed quite a few people now, Headmaster. I'm not done yet. You know the oath I took when I started down this path. You know what it means in the long run.”

Dumbledore just watched Harry with a soft, sad expression. Slowly, he nodded his head.

“Right. One last major thing for the evening, then. You know the basics of Occlumency and Legilimency, but what you don't know is that this ruddy scar is a direct link from my mind to Voldemort's. For as long as I can remember, I've had flashes of intense pain or heard

faint echoes of screaming. My mentors realized the true cause about five years ago, and I began the most intensive study of Occlumency ever known. I would imagine you think the 'level' designation is probably nonsense, but I'm living proof it's not. I'm level five – have been since earlier this summer. My mentor was at seven before he died. It helps, but the connection is on the inside, not the outside. So I still get flashes of pain and the like, but at least I can keep my thoughts to myself. That git can't bother me directly anymore.”

Albus rose and walked over to the window next to Harry. They stood next to each other for a while, watching the night sky, during which Fawkes sat on the Headmaster's shoulder, quietly trilling a song of strength. “Harry, would you tell me who your mentors are?”

Harry laughed softly. He walked over to the bookcase and pulled out the single, massive tome that was in the middle of the bottom shelf. He dropped it onto the Headmaster's desk with a heavy thud. The Theory of Magic: Essays of the Essence of Energy, edited by R.J.L.

Harry waved vaguely at the book while looking back at the Headmaster. “Every contributor and editor in that pre-release volume has been or is one of my tutors. I think the official release will be held after old Snakey has been put down for good. As for what level my abilities are at, I think we should talk about that next time.”

Dumbledore nodded while looking at the tome on his desk. “I think, Harry,” Dumbledore began, “that we should call it an evening. We both have much to think about, and it is quite late, nearly two in the morning. I suggest we meet here again tomorrow, directly after lunch. My morning will be occupied by dealing with your charges against Professor Snape. Regardless of your earlier statements, I still believe the man is working for me in all honesty and was simply unsure of what the change in the Dark Mark meant. I have forbidden him from going anywhere when summoned by that method, which is why he was unaware of the rebirth. Are you sure you won't consider dropping your charges?”

“Not a chance,” said Harry offhandedly. “Based on all the stuff I've heard about him, the man is only getting the first taste of what he deserves.”

Dumbledore bowed his head in resignation. "Very well. Do you agree that we have covered everything tonight that we needed to and that we shall resume our discussion tomorrow afternoon, then?"

Harry nodded his agreement. "I agree that we have covered everything well enough tonight." Hopefully that agreement was enough to satisfy the magic behind their oaths. "Oh, I'm willing to try sleeping in the dormitory, sir, but for the record, that may not work out. If there are problems, I will let you know, and we can come up with some alternate arrangements."

Dumbledore frowned briefly but nodded. Extending a wizened hand, he snapped his fingers loudly. "Rosen!" he called. A short house-elf, looking rather cute in a Hogwarts tea cosy, popped into the room. She looked at Harry briefly before turning her attention to Dumbledore.

"Rosen will show you to the Gryffindor common room, Harry. The password is 'Patronus.' Just tell it to the portrait, and she will allow you in. Rosen will show you to your dormitory. I shall see you at breakfast." Giving Harry a final nod, Dumbledore rose and waved him out the door. Harry followed the house-elf down the steps to the Headmaster's office and through a maze of staircases and corridors.

"Don't people find it irritating that the stairs keep moving?" Harry muttered.

"Most people seem to like it," Floppy observed, shuddering slightly before becoming a dark brown fedora. Harry gave a start; the Hat had been quiet for so long that he had all but forgotten about it. "Students find it a convenient excuse for being a minute late to class. Well, the first years get a bit frustrated, but you'd already know that if you came here when you were supposed to."

Harry laughed bitterly. "Right, and give Dumbledore the opportunity to regulate what information is available to me? I respect the man for his achievements, Floppy, but I'd heard too many stories about Albus Dumbledore even before my first letter of invitation arrived. I could not just blindly accept his seemingly innocent offer to go to Hogwarts. I

knew part of the prophecy, and I knew I needed training. Not having any official contact with the magical world before that date made it clear to me that Dumbledore was unconcerned with my problem, given that he knew of the situation with our favourite psychopathic terrorist.”

“You do realize that the portraits you are passing will report what we're talking about to others?” Floppy asked.

Harry shook his head quickly. “No, they won't. Only you and I can understand what I'm saying. Everyone else will only hear an annoying buzz, like too many insects flying next to their ears. Errr, well, whatever portraits use for ears, at any rate.”

Their conversation came to a halt when they reached the portrait of a very large woman wearing a frilly pink dress. She was clearly sleeping. Harry tapped the frame with his finger, causing her to hastily straighten up and look blearily at him. “What? I was having the nicest dream...”

“Patronus.” Harry said.

The Fat Lady nodded drowsily. “Well, you're out late, aren't you? In you get.” She was asleep again before the portrait was even fully closed.

The house-elf tugged his sleeve forwards, guiding Harry through the dark common room. It was chilly with the fires out, but the large windows showing the night sky made it quite pleasant. It was a definite improvement over the dull orange glow of the night sky he was used to seeing.

“This is the boys' staircase, sir. Mustn't try the girls' staircase, sir, it sets alarms off,” the house-elf warned.

Harry made a mental note to figure out how to get around that. After all, every rule needed to be broken at least once. As he followed the house-elf up the staircase, she pointed out a door with a sign on it which read ‘FIFTH-YEAR STUDENTS’.

While not a very imaginative or lively caption, the designation probably kept confusion to a minimum. Harry decided that the situation would have to change shortly.

The house-elf opened the door and pointed to a bed near the window. "That's you's, sir, we's put you's trunk at the foot. Good night, sir." With a soft 'pop' the elf went back to her other duties.

Harry stepped back to the staircase and closed the door. Pausing for a moment, he pulled his wand out and tapped the plate on the door. The 'FIFTH-YEAR STUDENTS' tag came off cleanly in his hand. Chuckling, he removed the plates from all the doors and then randomly reattached them. He suspected that only a first year would get the wrong room, but it would be amusing to find out for sure. Harry then drifted back to the common room below.

"Well, Floppy," Harry began, sitting on the couch facing out the windows in the deserted common room. "What think you now?" Harry stretched a bit to put his feet up on the end table, enjoying the darkness and quiet of the common room.

The Hat twisted gently from side to side as though swaying in a soft wind. "I find that Albus has been keeping a lot of secrets, Mr Potter. I knew some of that from overhearing conversations in the Headmaster's office, but the picture is much clearer now. Do you know what you need to do?"

Harry sat quietly for a few minutes. "I think I need to start with getting Dumbledore to teach me the more advanced magic. The Hogwarts curriculum is rather limited. The books in his office are far beyond N.E.W.T. level and seem more appropriate for what I need to be learning right now."

"Magic isn't everything, Mr Potter." It was a bit of a cryptic statement, but what else could you expect from a sentient Hat that sat around for eons with nothing to do except for ten minutes once a year?

"Of course not," Harry replied. "Was there a point to that, or are you just trying to be Dumbledore's number one fan?"



Floppy jumped a bit to one side of his head and pulled the tip into itself with a sucking motion, looking rather like a jaunty beret. "Uncalled for, Mr Potter! Let's try again. How do you really do magic, Mr Potter?"

Harry could feel a flicker of irritation rising. "Don't you start with me on magical theory. I know how I do magic. You're being deliberately obtuse, and I'm tired and not thinking clearly. Spit it out, would you?"

Floppy made a slight popping noise before turning into a perfect top hat, only about a hundred years out of style. "I don't know if I should. I am worried about what you are using to drive your magic, Mr Potter. Specifically, what patterns you have chosen to set your mind with. It's a slippery slope you're on, and no one will be able to catch you if you fall." Floppy turned into a long, soft nightcap with a large frizzy ball at the end, and suddenly became inert, as though turning off for the night.

Shrugging and thinking about annoying magical artefacts that could turn into three-foot-long yarn snakes, Harry rose and went back up the stairs to the dormitory he would be sleeping in while he was a Gryffindor student. He was far too tired and frustrated to train tonight. As he quietly made his way over to his bed, he pulled out a blank sensory monitor and quickly started to copy from his current one to the blank one. While the orbs were glowing during the duplication stage, he pulled out a large piece of parchment and began to compose his letter for the evening.

My most excellent plotters, partners, and scoundrels,

I must start this letter by saying you each owe me 100 Galleons. You all swore that it would take me at least three days to get Dumbledore unhinged. I am happy to report that it took less than three hours from when I first met him. As evidence, and future blackmail material, I submit along with this letter a copy of my sensory monitor. Please note the fun on the train with that idiot Malfoy, the fun with Snape, the fun with Dumbledore, and the most excellent Sorting. I have made one new friend. He likes to go by the name 'Floppy' – but you'll have to watch the playback to find out more. If one of you can figure out how to make a wizarding photo from a sensory monitor, we could

make a killing with these pictures of Malfoy, Severus, and Albus. Possibly of the redheaded clan members too. Well, it was fun for me at any rate.

To more serious business – I have received from Dumbledore some of the information we have been after. You will find it also on the monitor log. I ask each of you to study Dumbledore's comments and the prophecies he has recited, and to offer some of your vaunted mentoring. I am most concerned with the whole “fire” nonsense. I suspect Dumbledore completely missed the boat on the last one, but... only time will tell. That will make sense when you hear the prophecies. I will continue to send nightly monitor copies to you whenever Dumbledore and I have a meeting, or I otherwise discover something of merit.

Now to the best part. I find myself in a prank war with two of the Weasley boys – Fred and George. They are unaware of what they have started, but I will happily accept their inevitable unconditional surrender. If I find them worthy opponents, I will be extending the offer to have them join our fold as part of the next generation. Tomorrow I am going to demand a blanket pass to all restricted material in the library and will make myself visible reading said texts so that I will bring fear to my opponents.

Now, I need a couple of you to put your heads together and come up with a bit of custom work. I have effectively put Snape on notice that his days are numbered, and I expect him to come back fighting when the Aurors finally release him. In the interim, my guess is that I have three days before Dumbledore and Fudge spring him, and I cannot waste this time. I am looking specifically for some enchanted objects to be made and for one custom prank spell for use on Snape, which I'll describe below.

The objects should be comfortable enough to be worn, manufactured in such a way that every student can have one, and, most importantly, ready by Sunday afternoon. Price, as you know, is immaterial on this. I need them to have the following properties...

Harry spent another five minutes finishing off his letter, before rolling it up and sealing it with a bit of hot wax. Pulling out his wand, he

moved the tip through several intricate motions before tapping his trunk, causing it to spring open. After a few moments of digging, Harry pulled out a small box, roughly two feet on each side and one foot tall, made of a grey slate rock. Lifting the cover, Harry deposited his letter inside along with the copy of his sensory monitor for the day. He then gently closed the lid, tapped the top of the box and said, "Zing!"

With a brief popping noise, the top of the box flickered gold for a second before reverting to a dull grey. Returning the box to his trunk, then closing the trunk and tapping the lock once with his wand, Harry stripped down to his boxers and crawled into bed.

"Goodnight, Floppy. We'll talk more tomorrow, right?" Harry asked.

"I look forward to it, Mr Potter," the Hat replied, draping itself across the pillow like something from a Dr. Seuss story.

oOo oOo oOo

A/N:

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to Chreechree and cwarbeck. Thanks to random contributors for assisting in the Brit-picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

## Chapter 5: A rolling stone...

The pain in his leg was throbbing slightly as Harry moved slowly down the pavement. The air was crisp and cold. His jacket was too large, and the wind was more biting and less enjoyable than it should have been. While December was only gone in part, it was going to be a long holiday at home soon. The houses were nice enough in an abstract way from the outside, but the people on the inside had long since shown their nature. Limping a bit as he moved closer to the end of the road, his eyes scanned the area for the other neighbourhood children. Harry wanted to just get home in peace and not be bothered by the usual factions. He felt ambivalent about the weekend starting, but maybe he could get some rest for a change.

As he turned and moved up the walk to one of the perfectly replicated houses, he could vaguely understand why so many people would enjoy a house like this and what made the area desirable. It was modest but large enough for a growing family, built of superior materials with a bit of garden, not jammed in like the terraced houses with their shared walls. The garden was clean, the leaves of trees and blooms of flowers long since fallen, but the order and overall impression of careful cultivation endured. It was a safe haven from the elements, a place of privacy, a place of refuge, and a place of love – if your name was other than Harry Potter, at any rate.

Opening the door carefully, he tried hard to make sure that any dirt that had accumulated on his shoes was knocked off on the entry mat, otherwise he would be cleaning the floors for hours before dinner. Closing the door behind him, he moved into the corner by the hinges. He struggled a bit with his oversized coat, before he could get it on the foyer hooks. Only recently had Harry been able to stand on tiptoe to reach the hooks. His right leg shook a bit from the strain, but he managed to get the coat hung without falling down.

Harry could hear voices coming from the kitchen, his cousin's piping voice with a nasal whine, his aunt's voice echoing to drown out any of his words as her own words became increasingly shrill. It was normal in many respects, ever since starting primary school at the beginning of the year. Dudley always came home whinging about how the teacher treated him unfairly or how Harry had caused Dudley to do

something which got Dudley in trouble. It always amounted to punishment of one degree or another, followed by another long lecture. It mattered little what the truth was. Harry had firmly learned that lesson by the end of the first month.

If his aunt decided the offence was severe enough, like the time he got a star on his paper for solving a hard puzzle and Dudley had none, she would tell his uncle. As long as his uncle remained ignorant of Dudley's latest claim, Harry would get dinner and then spend the evening in the cupboard, another normal day for a freak with parents who were unable to keep a job and had forced his relatives to take him in even though they said they had too little money to spend on him. Dudley needed his presents and special things, after all, and Harry would get whatever was left. Out of their generosity and kind hearts. His parents had been so stupid and ungrateful that in a drunken stupor they had driven into a tree, killing them both. Leaving him as a burden. An unwanted mouth. And no money. A problem that they had graciously deigned to try and solve. By the end of the second month, Harry knew not to do well on his assignments at school.

And he should be thankful. Grateful. Happy to do anything they needed, since otherwise he would be out there, in the street, at an orphanage, and the world out there would treat him horribly. He would be hungry. He might be imprisoned. Harry was less than clear why he might go to prison, but his uncle told him he would. He could be killed. Harry wondered sometimes if it would really be that bad. Surely his parents missed him, even if they were bad people who never did an honest day's work.

The sudden scraping of a chair in the kitchen and the tread of a heavy foot made Harry start shaking for reasons that had nothing to do with his leg. He knew running would only make it worse if his uncle had decided that he needed to be punished again, so the simplest course was to just wait for what was coming.

He kept his eyes on his shoes, which were larger than his feet by a good bit, loose despite the extra socks he had stuffed inside. Making eye contact was unpredictable. Sometimes it made things worse; other times it saved him from the punishments when he was extra

bad and just made them normal bad punishments. It was safest to look down until the voice gave away what was right to do.

“BOY!” The shout drowned out the whinging and screeching of his aunt and cousin in the kitchen. The deadly rage in the voice told him everything. A heavy silence descended, and Harry knew this was a time to keep his eyes down. “GET OVER HERE!” Harry shuffled to stand near his uncle and could see Dudley smirking at him through the kitchen portal. His aunt was moving around the kitchen, preparing dinner. The desire to know why his uncle was home early never crossed his mind.

Harry risked a quick glance at his uncle’s face. It made him wish he had kept his eyes down, for his uncle saw the glance. He knew it was going to be worse now. The deep purple of anger was so vibrant Harry had never seen the depth of it before. “Dudley told me you asked to see the school nurse today. Is this true?” His uncle’s voice had gone from deafening to sibilant whispering, a promise of pain soon to come.

Harry shook his head quickly. “No, Uncle, I didn’t ask! I swea—”

The backhand left Harry dazed and staring at his uncle from the floor. Something warm was oozing down the side of his face, and he felt mildly surprised; he had no idea why he was on the floor.

“DON’T YOU LIE TO ME, BOY!” A spot on his uncle’s forehead began throbbing slightly, an oddly fascinating pulsation making the red and purple skin bulge unpleasantly, almost like a maggot trying to break free from a rotting carcass. A foot made heavy contact on his already injured right thigh, and Harry cried out involuntarily. “What did you tell them?!” his uncle screamed at him, drawing the foot back for another blow. Harry’s memory was a little scattered, and panic started to set in.

“Nothing! The teacher took me! I didn’t ask for—”

The foot landed again, and Harry curled into a foetal position to try and protect himself. There would be no real rest this weekend. “After all we do for you! GET! UP! NOW!” Harry struggled to his knees, then

his feet. His uncle was holding a belt by the end, the shiny buckle glinting in the afternoon sunshine from the window as it dangled freely. Harry could see the dust particles swirling in a crazy dance of jubilation as his leg and back ached from the kicks his uncle gave him.

Harry was shoved hard into the wall before his uncle ripped the door open to his cupboard. Throwing Harry on the floor of the cupboard, the whistling snap of leather cracked across his back with the buckle digging painfully into his shoulder. He cried out, unable to stop the tears. "I'm sorry, Uncle, I'm—" The crack again landed on his back, and time seemed to go askew as he watched the spiders in his cupboard scuttle away in slow motion.

"You! Will! Never! Talk! To! The! Nurse! Again!"

Each word was accompanied by a crack, and Harry could hear the giggles from his cousin in the background. The sound of pans on the stove made a strange counterpart to the whistling belt, floating giggles, and grunts from his uncle. Harry tried to look up one more time to explain, to say that he tried to avoid going, to say anything at all, but all he saw was the buckle coming back down, now arcing toward his head —

"Unnnhhhh!" Harry shot out of the blankets into a half-kneeling position, his heart pounding in his chest so hard he thought it was trying to escape. His forearms were extended, crossing in front of his head, warding off the blow that would never land. His lungs were burning from trying to inhale great gulps of air. He could feel the adrenaline pumping wildly, his body ready to fight to survive. Sweat was trickling down his face. His old scars gave minor echoes of pain from injuries long past, a subtle reminder of days gone but not forgotten. He hated thinking about the Dursleys and his life there from before.

After nearly a decade of freedom, the memories were more distant, obscured by clouds of hazy mist, as though unreal, until something would trigger his subconscious to remind him. Then the memories would sharpen, shattering the barriers he kept in his own mind.

Harry put his hands down and tried to relax. His heart was still trying to run a marathon, his breathing was heavy and erratic, and his control over his magic was slipping as a soft glow started to manifest near his fingers. The jarring impact of remembering his long-buried emotions, coupled with his present, deeper understanding of them always left him feeling slightly nauseous.

Talking with the headmaster was the most likely trigger, that was obvious. Hearing that so-widely-revered man confess to being the reason he had no parents, and then to harbouring the other man that left his life in ruin, was more than any sane person could take. That the bastard Snape had rushed off to lick the arse of that ponce Voldemort, fully hoping to see the world fall to a tyrant by relating that little bit of prophecy....

Looking at the man of the Light who had casually made a life-altering decision about what to do with Harry, well intentioned or not, and had never once checked on him during those four long years was bound to have consequences. It was certain to stir those things he wanted buried, he wanted eradicated, he wanted pushed out of his mind for all time. As his breathing slowed and his anger bubbled, Harry reached out and began the meditation and relaxation exercises Nicolas Flamel had taught him. Sometimes it would take a while, but the methods were most successful if practiced regularly.

As he slowly worked his way back to consciousness, he could hear the regular breathing of the other boys in his dorm. With his heart rate and breathing relatively normal and the adrenaline-induced shaking of his body all but ceased, Harry lay back in the bed to stare at the canopy stretched over the four posts.

"Bee in your bonnet, Mr Potter?" Floppy asked quietly.

Harry twitched in surprise. Sometimes he forgot the Hat was there. In general, he chose to never wear a silly wizard's hat at all, but he knew he had agreed to wear Floppy until a proper Sorting could happen. The idea that he was less than aware of the Hat bothered him. He would have to be careful of what he said until he and the Hat could reach some level of agreement and trust with each other.



"You would know if you were a bonnet," Harry replied equally quietly. The Hat offered nothing in response, as though it did not get the joke, or, more likely, its sense of humour had lost any appreciation for pedantic jokes after a few hundred years.

It was odd, but talking to the Hat seemed like a good idea even if he would never be able to tell it everything. "Just some dreams, Floppy, just some dreams."

"Do you normally wake up from dreams ready to kill people, Mr Potter?"

Harry smiled wryly at the Hat's attempt to probe him verbally rather than mentally. "Depends on the people, Floppy. I thought you couldn't tell what I was thinking or feeling?"

Floppy pulled the long, frizzy nightcap tail into itself, shuddered momentarily, and turned into a baseball hat with the brim pulled down over his eyes. "Do you think I was made yesterday? And I thought you could see." The tone Floppy used lacked the dry sarcasm Harry expected but instead carried hints of disappointment.

"Look, how do I know I can trust you? After all, you serve the school, and Dumbledore runs the school." Harry lifted the brim of the cap slightly, so he could see the grey pre-dawn light filtering in from the window. "How do I know that what we talk about won't come back to bite me later?"

"A fair challenge, Mr Potter. I am, by design, not allowed to speak of what I learn when talking to people. Just as I cannot tell you what drives Mr Ronald Weasley, I cannot tell the Headmaster what drives you." Floppy lightened in colour from dark blue to pale beige. "There should always be someone to confide in, Mr Potter. I am here for that purpose, though they never use me anymore except to Sort the students."

"What?" Harry was puzzled at the last statement. "You mean originally, you were put out for students to talk to, or whinge at, or whatever?"

“Indeed. Godric felt that the students needed an impartial ear to discuss things with, one who would not, or rather, could not, betray their confidences. Since he had already enchanted me to understand their minds and Sort them, it was a minor modification.”

Harry could almost hear the shrug in Floppy’s voice. “So why did they stop using you for it?”

“It’s the stigma, Mr Potter. Would you want to be seen talking to someone that was there to help you adjust? To help you feel better about yourself and your situation? Would your pride allow that?”

Harry pulled his curtains back and spent a few minutes looking out the window from his bed. The sky was cloudy and it was promising to be another dreary day in the hills, but rain would not likely fall today. Quiet moments like this let him reflect more than he was able to during the day when plans and counter-plans dominated his thoughts. “I think we all could use that, Floppy. But no, I wouldn’t be comfortable doing that in front of others.”

Deciding it was time to get up, Harry unlocked his trunk and pulled out some basic Muggle-style clothes for the day. After getting dressed and activating his next sensory monitor, dropping it into the special pouch inside his clothes, he noticed something odd in the bed by the corner. There were too many arms and legs in that bed for one person, but the semi-transparent curtains made it impossible to see what exactly was going on. Taking a couple of steps closer, Harry realised that there were two boys snuggled up next to each other. This was either a sure sign that people were very open with relationships here, or that someone had fallen for his switched door plates last night. Harry quickly fetched his camera from his trunk and walked quietly over to the foot of the bed. Pulling back the curtains all the way, he proceeded to shoot several photographs as the camera’s flash lit up the room.

The bright light was apparently enough to wake up the bigger boy slightly, who grunted and tried to roll over. Harry kept taking pictures as the boy suddenly realised he was trying to roll on top of someone else, and his eyes shot open as he quickly sat up.

“Wha’ in tha’ hell?” The boy had a bit of an accent and sounded like he came from the northern areas, but his hand reached out and smacked the smaller blonde boy on the head before Harry could hear more of it. “COLIN!” he yelled. Harry snapped a few more pictures as Colin woke up and looked blearily at the other boy.

“Seamus?” he asked in a sleep-induced fog of confusion.

The other boys in the room were waking up at the commotion and came fully awake as Seamus nearly screamed his head off. “What’r’ya doin’ in me bed?!”

Ron and Neville jumped up to investigate, and another boy that Harry thought was named Dean leaned out of his curtains, swiping at his eyes.

Colin looked horrified. Click! Harry’s camera took the last shot on the roll of film as Colin yelled back, “Your bed?! This is my bed!”

Chuckling to himself, Harry hurriedly put his camera back in his trunk before locking it. As he looked up, he could see both Seamus and Colin starting to realise that someone had been doing something while they were sleeping together.

Harry grinned evilly, needing to leave before they finally made the connection to what the bright lights had meant. “Good morning, boys. You looked awfully comfortable together. I’m glad you’re so honest with your feelings for each other. Cheers!”

Harry strode away as Colin stammered out an explanation involving an early morning, the bathroom, and the door, while Seamus started smacking Colin in the head with his pillow and yelling for him to get out. He could hear Neville’s muffled voice telling them that it was okay with him if they continued to sleep together.

As Harry closed the door behind him, he heard Ron cat-calling and whistling at the two. “Mr Potter, that was rather inappropriate of you.” Floppy actually seemed a bit upset with Harry.

“Oh, come off it, Floppy. In a couple of weeks, when they’re over their embarrassment and what not, I’ll give them the photos, and we’ll all laugh about it. It didn’t really hurt anyone, and it will teach everyone to be a little more alert.” Harry felt that it was no big deal, but then he was used to being embarrassed regularly in some way. Floppy had no response, so Harry just settled down in an arm chair down in the House common room, partially facing the fire burning merrily away. He pulled out the book he had borrowed from Dumbledore, *The Foundation of Wards* by Bruce Forte

Right as Harry was getting settled and had begun reading the introduction, a loud scuffling on the boys’ staircase drew his attention. Fred and George were coming down the stairs complaining about how amorous younger students kept people from getting a decent lie-in on a Saturday morning. As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Fred let out a loud yell, “Harry! Still alive, eh?”

George ran over to Harry with one hand extended. “Harry Potter! Oh, I’m your biggest fan! Would you autograph something for me?” His batting eyelashes and simpering demeanour had Harry chuckling.

Before he could respond, however, there was a yell from the girls’ staircase that sounded faintly like, “POTTER!” which was rapidly followed by a thunderous clattering. Fred and George just looked at each other, both confused by whatever was going on.

The sound of running footsteps caused all three boys to look at the girls’ staircase as a fiery redhead shot into the common room. Her long hair streamed behind her, her wand was clutched tightly in her right fist and emitting random sparks, and her eyes were flashing as she marched over to Harry.

Fred and George took one look at their sister before diving behind a sofa on the opposite side from Harry.

Harry smirked at the girl who was almost literally on fire. “Why, good morning, Ginny. Sleep well?”

Ginny marched up to him, her teeth clenched together tightly, clearly fighting an inner battle not to point her wand at him. "You owe me, Potter, you owe me!" she hissed at him.

"Oh?" Harry raised his left eyebrow, amused to see Fred and George peeking over the back of the sofa.

"You set us up. You provoked me, embarrassed me, and then fled before you could get your just desserts. And then Dumbledore tells us we can't get payback!" She was breathing heavily through her nostrils, obviously torn between the urge to hex him – and damn the consequences that Dumbledore had cautioned everyone about – and leaving him alone. Harry suspected that if her brothers were the pranksters of repute they seemed to be, she would intrinsically know that it was more logical of her to bide her time and strike when he was least suspecting. Her glare, however, said everything her words did not. "You. Owe. Me!"

Harry chuckled. "That's what this cute little display is about? Your hostility to a little flirtation?" Harry shook his head theatrically while Fred and George ducked back behind the sofa, paler than he recalled seeing anyone with such fair skin. Ginny, if possible, became even more enraged. "Right, so what if I give you the freedom to try to get back at me under the same rules as Fred and George?"

Ginny's wand was beginning to rise steadily as a glint of malicious intent crept into her eyes. "Ah-ah," Harry cautioned her. "This weekend is declared off-limits. If you want in on the game, you'll have to wait until Monday." Harry sat back to watch the fuming girl, once again amused that her brothers held her in such fear. It seemed very inconsistent with her fearing other people like Malfoy, but surely there was a logical explanation in there somewhere.

Ginny stood staring at Harry for a long period of blatant irritation, although he could tell she was slowly regaining control of her ire. "Fine. This is a two-front war, Potter! You'll be begging me for mercy when I'm done with you!"

Harry laughed at her, before looking at Fred and George who had just now peeped back over the sofa. "And what should I ask her for if she gives up first?" Harry called to them.

Fred and George frantically shook their heads in a warning, but Harry was enjoying the idea of a three-way prank war. It was reminiscent of being back home. "I know. If you can't get your payback on me within a month, Ginny, then you have to do whatever I ask of you for a weekend. Fair?"

Ginny shook her head. "I'm not agreeing to that. You could ask for anything!"

Harry waved her complaint off. "Fine, fine, you have to do anything that Fred and George and Ron agree to, how's that?"

Ginny looked dubiously at her brothers who were finally coming out from behind the sofa. "As long as Ron agrees, alright then. His judgment I trust. What are you three doing at this hour, anyway?"

Fred winked at Harry before standing straight and throwing his chest out. "Harry here has a little business proposition for us, ickle Gin-Gin."

Harry chuckled quietly at the nickname. It was another wonderful inconsistency in these people that they went from fear to antagonizing their sister so casually.

Ginny squinted closely at them before sitting down across from Harry. Motioning her brothers down, she looked back at Harry with a smirk. "Let's hear it then, Potter."

"Oh? I didn't know you were joining the twins in this." Harry smiled blandly back at her, causing her smirk to become a frown.

George just sighed dramatically. "She's bound to worm her way into it sooner or later, Harry. Might as well include her in it now to minimize the damage later."

Harry looked at Fred who just nodded in acceptance. Looking back at Ginny, Harry nodded briefly. "Right then. You lot go get dressed,

meet me here in ten minutes, and we'll talk over breakfast. Yeah?" The three Weasleys nodded in turn and ran off to get dressed.

"Is it me, Floppy," Harry asked, "or is that family completely mental?"

"I already told you, Mr Potter, I'm not at liberty to say what I know about others." Harry thought that Floppy sounded downright smug.

"Yeah, yeah," Harry muttered as he looked longingly at the book in his lap. "So much for some quiet reading."

"I thought you'd spend the morning thinking about the Headmaster's comments last night, Mr Potter." Harry was unsure if the Hat was being slightly reprimanding, but that was one area he was not interested in thinking about right now.

"Oh, I was certain you wanted me to while away my time pondering your words of wisdom, Floppy." Harry was striving for a breathless and idolizing voice. "Should I pay more attention to the old man instead?"

"Really, Mr Potter. Must you be so difficult?" Floppy made a loud popping noise before reverting back to the wizard's hat once again leaning over his right ear.

Fred and George came and sat back down across from him, winking while they waited for Ginny. Fred leaned over and asked quietly, "So what was the commotion in your room earlier?"

Ginny arrived before Harry could answer. "Commotion? What commotion?"

Harry, Fred, and George rose and walked with Ginny out the door. "Well," Harry said, "I was curious to know how many people actually read those little plaques on the doors. You know, 'FIFTH-YEAR STUDENTS' and what not. So I swapped them around last night."

Fred and George just looked at each other, while Ginny shook her head. "Tell me it wasn't that easy," Ginny mumbled.

“Anyway, this morning I took some fantastic pictures of, uh, Colin and Seamus, I think, sharing a bed. They were really cute, too. I was sorry to wake them up taking the pictures, but you know how lovers can be. They had quite the quarrel over who was in whose bed.” Harry shook his head theatrically while Fred and George just started laughing evilly. Ginny was looking thoughtfully at Harry.

When they reached the Gryffindor table, Harry sat next to George while Fred and Ginny sat opposite them. After they each loaded their plates with breakfast, Harry leaned in a bit as he started cutting up his bangers. “Right, you recall I said I had a little proposition. Some of your time in exchange for you getting good publicity?”

“And profit!” Fred reminded him.

Harry nodded. “And profit, but that conversation has to wait until tomorrow. Let’s meet down here around this time for breakfast then, and we’ll talk about that part of it, right?” The three redheads nodded back at him. “Right, so let’s get to it.” Harry pulled his wand out and waved it in a few intricate patterns before putting his wand back. Faced with the three curious sets of eyes, Harry shrugged briefly. “Perimeter charm. It lets me know if anything alive is close enough to listen.”

Pausing to work on his scone while the others ate and did a little Harry-watching, he took a moment to collect his thoughts. “First off, I’ve put Snape on notice that his time here isn’t going to be like it has been.” All three stared at him hard. “I got him arrested, but the charges won’t stick. I suspect he’ll be back here no sooner than tomorrow evening and no later than Monday morning in time for lessons.” Harry resumed eating, while the other three had given up on eating to stare at him.

Ginny leaned in a bit. “You got Snape and Malfoy and Crabbe and Goyle arrested?” Harry nodded. “I love you!” she whispered to him. “You’re my hero!”

Harry smirked. “It gets better. I’ve got a copy of a law here I plan on using to get him fired. I need your help with it, though.” Harry pulled a



scroll out of his pocket, where he had secured it earlier in the morning. "Take a look."

George moved around the table to lean between Fred and Ginny to read the parchment.

Wizengamot Law 23.145-A

### Regulations Governing Cauldron Thickness

In order to redress the growing influx of teaching supplies, in particular cauldrons for potions work, this decree is passed to hereby set minimum acceptable standards for cauldrons in potions work. To wit, the effect of poorly designed...

Fred looked up puzzled. "What good is that prat Percy's daft law for us?"

Harry was surprised at their recognition of the law. "Percy?"

Ginny shrugged. "He's another brother, the pompous git."

Harry shook his head. "Just how many brothers do you have, ickle Gin-Gin?"

Ginny's eyes flashed fire as she glared at Harry. "Six. Call me that again and that whole truce thing will end before you can blink."

Harry smirked back at her for a second. "Yes, fair and compassionate Gin-Gin, my angel with a dented halo." If anything, this just caused Ginny to glare harder at Harry while fingering her wand on the table top. Harry pointed toward the bottom of the scroll. "Try reading that part. It might help you find enlightenment."

The three Weasleys once again leaned over the scroll. After a minute of silence, George looked at Harry and wiped an imaginary tear from his eye. "Brilliant!"

Harry grinned back at him. "That's what they call a codicil or a rider. I know some people that wanted to get some, ah, standards set for

tutors that teach students independently of the schools. They just, err, happened, right, happened to get it worded such that it applies to teachers and professors at regular schools as well. Then they slipped it into this other bit of business on cauldrons.... An oversight, I'm sure...." Harry was enjoying the fierce looks of conspiracy from the other three.

Fred nodded his head. "A shame, really. We'll have to point that out to our brother sometime next century." George and Ginny both put on solemn faces as they nodded along with him. Fred rolled the parchment up and handed it back to Harry. "Okay, so we need witnesses to report on his teaching methods and how he deals with students. How do we set that up so there won't be any debate over the witnesses' honesty?"

If possible, Harry's grin became even more evil. "Ever heard of a sensory monitor?"

George whistled. "Blimey, Harry! Those are expensive! Something like five thousand Galleons!"

Harry nodded. "I have a few. In fact, I have one running right now. Due to recent events, I never leave home without it." Looking around, he noticed that the Great Hall was slowly starting to fill up a bit with other breakfast seekers. "Right, we need to wrap this up. I want you to find one volunteer in each year of Gryffindor. They'll wear the monitor during their Potions class. Each one is able to hold just over thirty hours of material, so we ought to be able to get a whole week's worth of his lessons in just one of these babies. Tomorrow, after our breakfast meeting, I'll take you off to show you how to work it. But you have to get the volunteers first. Clear?"

His three conspirators nodded back at him. Harry flicked his wand a couple of times to release the proximity alarms. Ginny leaned over briefly before Harry could go back to his breakfast. "One quick question. We're still students with little money. How are we going to bring charges against him? How will we get out of here to do that?"

Harry smiled beatifically at her. "Trust me."

The three Weasleys shook their heads and resumed their seats. While Harry finished his scone and started helping himself to some fruit and more bangers, he listened to the playful banter of the three siblings. It was quite sharp and pointed at times, yet friendly and caring in a way that made him miss his mentors a bit.

As he sat back from his second helping of breakfast, Hermione, Ron, and Neville strolled in and sat next to them. Ron noticed Harry glancing around a bit and sat down next to him, on the other side from George. "Looking for Seamus and Colin, Harry?" Ron asked.

Harry nodded vaguely. Ron chuckled a bit. "Colin is hiding from Seamus, and Seamus is trying to figure out how to get your trunk open to get that camera. He spent a good five minutes cussing you out. I think I even learned a couple of new ones."

Harry just shook his head. Rising to his feet, he replied to Ron, "He's welcome to try. If he can get past the locks and protection spells, he's welcome to it. I've got to run, so I'll see you all later." Harry looked over at his trio of evil plotters. "And I'll talk to you lot at lunch, right?"

Hermione looked up at Harry expectantly. "Where are you going, Harry? I was hoping we could talk a bit about those spells you cast yesterday!"

Harry winked at Neville again, before leaning over the table. "I'm off to London. Need anything?"

Hermione looked puzzled. "London? But how?"

Harry pulled out his wand, traced a couple of patterns in the air, before looking at Hermione and saying, "Magic!" while simultaneously disappearing with a soft pop!

Hermione looked outraged. "You can't Apparate in Hogwarts!" she nearly shouted in a shrill voice.

While the other students looked alternately puzzled and impressed, Harry struggled to stay as still as possible and not laugh. If he moved too quickly, the Disillusionment Charm would cause ripples in the air,

giving away his position. It was a hard fight, but he managed to slowly walk out of the hall and stroll past the gates of Hogwarts before truly Apparating to the back entrance of the Leaky Cauldron at Diagon Alley.

Harry stood around waiting for the back door to open so he could enter the pub unobserved. Since this was the main entrance to Diagon Alley, it usually only took a minute or two. As an old crone came out of the pub, Harry slipped inside and scanned for his friend. Spotting him by the exit to Muggle London, Harry moved over slowly and tapped him once before whispering in his ear, "Outside!"

The thin man with slightly greying hair in jeans and a T-shirt rose and walked out into Muggle London. Harry followed him. Once they were far enough away to avoid attention, Harry asked Floppy if he could go back to the baseball cap for a while. With a soft shudder, the light beige cap was back on his head. Harry then dropped the Disillusionment Charm and looked at his friend. "How are your skills these days?" he asked while gesturing sharply at the hat on his head.

The man looked at Harry and shook his head briefly. Harry nodded his understanding that his friend's shields were insufficient for talking mind-to-mind. "Getting there, Harry," he said quietly. "Shall we?"

Harry nodded briefly. "Lead on, Remus, lead on."

oOo oOo oOo

A/N:

Yes, believe it or not, I actually know someone who left their bed, went to the restroom, came back and climbed into bed with someone else, and both of them woke up in the morning quite... surprised. We, however, were most amused. I've heard even more outrageous true stories of similar nature.

As my betas raised concerns, let me specify here to avoid Ginny-related flames: there is a reason she is acting like this. You'll have to ride it out to find out why. There be clues a plenty.

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to cwarbeck and Chreechree. Thanks to various people for contributing to the Brit-picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

## Chapter 6: ... keeps moving ...

Harry leaned back on the bench and enjoyed watching the locals and tourists gawk at the bronze statue of Eros across from him. He never really understood why tourists would travel hundreds, or even thousands, of miles just to have their picture taken in front of some landmark where everyone else had already posed for pictures. What was the point of going on holiday only to travel to the places everyone else went to? Was it some secret desire to go where no one else had been... recently?

Regardless of the reasons, the centrepiece of the fountain at Piccadilly Circus, combined with the five intersecting roads and loads of shops, ensured that there were all types of people from all walks of life within a stone's throw of his seat. It was always easiest to blend in when the masses of people were so used to random appearances that walking nearly starkers through the area would fail to get much of a glance. The advantage, of course, was that most wizards and witches who would be looking for Harry would dress so ridiculously that they would be easy to spot long before they could see Harry through the crowds.

Enjoying a bit of sunshine warming his clothes and face, Harry watched a big black dog dart in and out of clumps of people. Fat gulls and pigeons would squawk in indignation as they flew into the air, but the dog paid their protests no mind. Turning his attention back to his companion, Harry suddenly realised how tired he was. They had been having this conversation since arriving a few hours before. They would get up and move periodically so as not to stay in one place too long, but the subject matter was unpleasant regardless of the setting.

"But do you understand, Harry?" Remus had a concerned glint in his eye that made Harry slightly uncomfortable. "They are still trying to decide what to do since Nicolas died. This situation has never happened before."

"Yes, Remus," Harry sighed. "I'll try to keep a low profile for the moment."

Remus reached out and clapped Harry on the shoulder firmly. "Thanks, Harry. This bit should blow over soon, and by then, some of those other pieces ought to be settled. You can always get things done. Just don't be directly involved in anything political."

Harry nodded, watching a few people milling in front of the row of Chinese restaurants. "Look, I need to be getting back to work on my conspirators-in-training. Will you have those things I asked for finished by tomorrow?"

Remus wolf whistled, causing the big black dog's ears to perk up. Making a come-hither gesture toward the dog, Remus smiled at Harry. "Of course. I can't wait to hear how well they work. With our afternoon free, you should have them in the box when you wake up. You do know they won't really stop any attack at all, right?"

Harry shrugged. "It will let people know, and knowing..."

"...is half the battle." Remus finished Harry's sentence and chuckled. "All right, Harry. Don't quote that at me anymore, please."

Harry smiled and then leaned down to hug the big dog blithely sitting on his feet. "I'll be in touch with a letter tonight if anything of importance happens. I don't know if Dumbledore plans to talk about anything of merit today, and honestly, I'm not up for another session with him after yesterday. It took a lot out of me to push him that hard, even if it was fun, but listening to him after dinner was harder than anything since this past summer." Harry was unable to shake the sombre mood that the memories of the summer had evoked.

Remus looked closely at Harry for a moment. "Don't overdo it, Harry. You've made your point, now back off and let him have a chance, right?"

Harry nodded and tossed his head toward the restaurant row. There would be plenty of deserted alleys back there from which he could leave. Harry and Remus looked on as Padfoot romped into the clusters of people milling and shopping. Harry was happy to be out in the sunshine, surrounded by people that had no clue who he was, why he was there, or what was at risk. The illusion of normalcy was

always pleasant when he allowed it to eclipse his natural instincts to be paranoid.

When Remus gave a quick nod, Harry ducked into the alleyway, made sure it was empty, Disillusioned himself, and Apparated back to the gates outside Hogwarts. Only allow your enemies to see what you want them to see... Sun Tzu may, or may not, have actually existed, but some of his doctrines were practical at all times. The scholars could argue about who wrote it, but Harry was much more concerned with how it applied to his everyday circumstances.

Taking care to move stealthily, Harry strolled back into the Great Hall at Hogwarts. Lunch appeared to be in full swing. Most of the hall was packed, and as he entered, he picked up snippets of conversation. The Slytherins seemed ominously quiet, with no real conversation taking place. A handful of them near the Head Table were whispering quietly, but the rest seemed to be either eating or watching the hall. As Harry passed the Hufflepuff table and walked toward Gryffindor, he heard bits of dialogue that could have been about anything.

“... says that there aren't any more real ones ...”

“... pass that, would you? I mean, really, what ...”

“... Dumbledore's been out all morning, Flitwick was ...”

“... no! When did he do that? I heard he was taught ...”

“... took her an age to start fixing his ...”

While not in the general habit of eavesdropping on random people, and even though none of the conversations seemed particularly sensitive, Harry was surprised that no one really seemed to be trying to prevent others from hearing their discussions. Well, no one that was at a table other than Slytherin.

Harry slowly walked directly behind Hermione. This was going to be unpleasant since it required a short cut with the wand movements, but it should make the time needed to release the Disillusionment fast



enough to not give away his trick yet. Concentrating briefly, Harry made a sharp flick and then smacked his hand hard before making a loud pop! noise. Hermione jumped up from her seat in shock while Harry smiled blandly at her, a short but intense sensation of heat flashing across his skin.

“Hermione! Is something wrong? You seem tense.” Harry tried for a worried expression, but he was less than positive it was working since the corner of his mouth kept smirking despite his efforts to control it.

Hermione glowered at Harry before calming down. “You can’t Apparate in Hogwarts, Harry!”

Harry feigned shock. “You can’t? Are you sure about that?” A bead of sweat was slowly rolling down the side of his face despite the cool temperature in the Great Hall.

Neville was smiling at Harry behind Hermione’s back, while Ron was vainly trying to drown his laughter in food. The end result was a bit of food spraying across his plate to the mild disgust of the people sitting around him. Hermione, however, stamped her foot. “Yes, I’m sure! It says so in Hogwarts, A History!”

Harry just shrugged. “Okay, so you can’t Apparate in Hogwarts. Does that mean I can’t?”

While Hermione was staring at Harry like a fish out of water, Harry leaned around her to see what book she was reading. “Magical Societies and Ancient Disciplines. A little light reading, there, Hermione? You could just ask me about the War Mage history, you know.” Harry looked away from her as she silently sank back into her seat. He needed to find Fred and George, who were possibly colluding with their sister.

“But you ignored my questions on magic yesterday and this morning...” Hermione seemed like a child with one of her favourite toys just out of reach.

Having located Fred's and George's distinctive red hair farther down the table, Harry glanced back at Hermione. "There's really only one question there. Do you honestly think that the Chinese invented Latin?" Harry waved to Ron and Neville before strolling off to meet his temporary partners.

"What does that have to do with my questions?" Hermione called after him.

Harry paused to smirk at her. "You tell me." To some extent it probably was not fair to tease Hermione. She was, after all, merely a product of the times and texts she had been subjected to. If her curiosity and passion for learning were as strong as Neville and Ron had been hinting at, however, that one question should keep her occupied for some time.

"Fred, my good fellow, look what the magic dragged in!" George seemed rather chipper as he waved to Harry while elbowing Fred in the ribs. "Have a good trip Harry?" Harry nodded before sitting across from Fred and George.

Harry leaned over the table in the most outrageously suspicious manner he could, constantly looking from side to side and checking behind him. "So, I've just got to know, why are there always empty seats around you two?" Harry asked in a mock whisper.

Fred put on a surprised face. "No! It's true! My dear brother, I do believe the commons are unwilling to sit too near us. Whatever have we done wrong?"

"Try bathing more regularly," Ginny said as she dropped into the seat next to Harry. "It helps." She was grinning impishly at the twins. Turning to Harry, he immediately noticed she appeared decidedly more relaxed. "Hello, Harry, did you bring me back something from London?" Her eyes were flashing with laughter, which surprised him a bit.

“Err, should I have?” This new facet to her personality was throwing Harry off, since she was lacking the burning pools of brimstone in her pockets.

“Harry, Harry,” she shook her head, “for someone who claims he’s flirting with his intended lady, you surely have a lot to learn. You’re supposed to bring me sweets, or maybe flowers, some kind of little gift to let me know how much you’ve missed me.”

Fred and George started laughing at him, which was enough for his standard reflexes to kick back in.

“Offering to tutor me in the ways of pleasing a woman, now are you?” Harry winked at her while reaching for the pumpkin juice.

Ginny laughed with delight. “As you well know, there are standards for tutoring these days – thanks to Percy, even if he doesn’t know it. Are you sure you’ll be able to handle my lessons? Will I need to give you any remedial lessons first? Hand-holding, basic courtesy, that kind of thing?”

Harry almost choked a bit on the last question but just managed to keep calm. “I shall be at your disposal, Gin-Gin of the fallen angels. You are free to assess my skills. Just tell me when, where, and most importantly, how you want me.”

Fred and George had their heads bent low in conversation, while the two girls – one on either side of the twins – shook their heads in silent laughter.

Ginny flushed slightly before calmly nipping the drink he just poured himself. “I’ll see when I can fit you in, Harry....” Apparently, her unintentional innuendo caught up with her as she nearly went scarlet. Fred and George rolled their eyes and watched the two of them with a type of strange tolerance.

George held his palm up to Harry. “Right, enough of the flirting, you two. Harry, meet Angelina,” George indicated the girl on his right. “She’s a Chaser on the Quidditch team.” Harry and Angelina nodded

politely at each other, although the hint of humour on her face left Harry a bit puzzled.

Fred jerked a thumb at the girl on his left. "This here's Katie, another Chaser, and beside her is Alicia, the last Chaser. We're the Beaters, our sister is Seeker and we're holding try-outs for Keeper soon. You wouldn't happen to play, would you?"

Harry shook his head. "Nice to meet you all. I fly well enough, I suppose, but I've never had the opportunity for anything other than a bit of pick-up playing. I don't Keep well at all."

Ginny smirked at Harry with that glint back in her eye. "Bit spoiled then, are you? Can't stand a little heat?"

Harry tried to puzzle out her meaning while the rest of the team chuckled at him. "Spoiled? What?"

Ginny patted his arm. "Don't worry your little head over it, Harry." She made no effort to conceal her slightly patronizing tone.

Harry was starting to wonder if he really would survive the next few weeks fighting the Weasley clan. While he would not be directly pranking Ginny, only evading whatever retribution she was planning, the wild inconsistencies in their attitudes were starting to cause him reservations. How do you plan for something when your opponent is unpredictable or perhaps even mentally unstable? Finding the patterns in their actions would take time, and it was more than likely that a good bit of his pride would get bruised in the interim.

Since she had swiped his goblet, Harry took the empty goblet in front of Ginny and poured himself a drink. "Made any progress since this morning?" Harry addressed the twins as he absently pulled a sandwich together on his plate.

George nodded. "Yeah. Between us, we've got fifth and seventh year covered, and we rounded up someone trustworthy in every other year."

Harry shook his head. "No, the four of us cannot be involved. Find someone else for fifth year and your year, and don't include family like Ron. It all needs to be from the perspective of an independent third party. As the people pressing the claim, none of your family can be independent witnesses even with the monitor."

Ginny was the first to ask what Harry surmised all of them were wondering. "How do you know these things?"

Harry smirked and ignored the question. "So, here's the plan. You three find the rest of the volunteers and then plan on spending a good hour or two with me after breakfast tomorrow. I'll show you what you'll need to teach your volunteers. Right?"

George and Ginny agreed, but Fred spoke up. "Let's not be hasty, Harry. We'll need plenty of time to get into that whole profit promise, too." Harry started to nod but was distracted when he realised that Ginny was munching on his sandwich.

Harry laughed at Ginny's pilfering and Fred's determination to discuss the profit issue. "Right, but that's over breakfast, and we're talking about after breakfast. Now if I could just manage to eat something for lunch today...." Harry finished by glaring at Ginny who was blatantly ignoring him while complaining at the lack of proper seasonings on her sandwich.

Fred nodded. "Just so long as we're clear, young Harry."

Harry grimaced. He was going to have to do something about that whole "young" bit the twins prattled on about. "I need to go train for a bit. Ginny, love, help yourself to the rest of my lunch, won't you? I think I took too much to finish by myself." Harry swept his hand at his plate of crumbs before rising to leave.

As he faced the doors out of the Great Hall, Harry was confronted with a startling sight. Every Slytherin student was silently staring at him.

Grinning, Harry pulled Floppy the baseball cap from his head, then waved it before him in a sweeping bow while keeping his eyes on the

Slytherins. When he put the cap back on his head, Floppy instantly changed back to an old wizard's hat hanging over his right ear. Humming tunelessly, he sauntered out of the Great Hall and toward the staircases, always keeping at least one eye on the Slytherin table.

As Harry climbed the maze of staircases, he kept glancing over his shoulder to make sure he had no trackers. When he reached the second-floor landing and started for the stairs to the third floor, he noticed George coming up behind him. "What is it, George?"

George looked puzzled. "How do you know I'm not Fred?"

Harry shrugged. "Trade secret."

George frowned at this but ignored it for the moment. "Fred's keeping Ginny occupied for a few minutes so I can come and talk to you, Harry. We need to have that long talk really soon, so how about now?"

Harry looked at his watch and thought about it. Dumbledore had not been in the Great Hall, so he was still at the Ministry dealing with the problem of keeping a fractionally domesticated Death Eater in the building. Harry had skipped his training last night, then had to meet Remus and Sirius this morning, and it was probably going to be another late night this eve. Harry just shook his head. "Sorry, I've got to train, so how about during tea tomorrow instead?"

George nodded his head. "Right, that works. Where are you going to train, by the way? Need a secret passage or something?"

Harry just grinned back. "I'm looking for a secret room that a mentor of mine told me about. He said he heard rumours about it even before he got to school, and it took him almost six years to discover the place."

George whistled softly. "A secret room, eh? We've found passages in and out of the castle, around the castle, and through the castle, but so far, no secret rooms. Let us know if you find it, right?"

Harry kept grinning. "I'll think about it after you surrender."

George leaned back as though horrified. “Never! We happy few shall prevail!” Posing theatrically with one hand on hip and the other shielding his eyes from an imaginary sun, George stomped back down the stairs singing a song about a wayward boy caught in battle, while Harry resumed his climb to the seventh floor.

Nicolas Flamel had told him about a room in Hogwarts that he had read about during his second year and then spent three more years locating: the Come and Go Room. It was on the seventh floor, across from a portrait of someone dubbed Barnabas the Barmy, but Nicolas never told him how to identify the exact painting. Neither Remus nor Sirius had heard of it, so they had nothing to offer except curiosity about actually finding the room. As he walked along the hall, Harry stopped abruptly when he saw a man trying to teach trolls to dance. He knew he had probably found the right spot. Only someone completely barmy would even think of it, let alone try it, and the subject of the painting appeared to be losing his battle.

Concentrating on a room in which he could both practice his martial arts and work on his magical training, Harry slowly paced back and forth three times. When the door materialized in the wall, he was very curious about what the Come and Go Room would have provided. A large padded room? Some mirrors? Mats? Practice dummies?

Opening the door and walking into the room, Harry was completely unprepared for what he saw. On the wall next to the door was a long bookcase filled with volumes. The far end of the room had a large matted area, behind which the wall was covered in mirrors. There was a simple student’s desk by the bookcase. The rest of the floor was made of beautifully polished wood.

The ceiling was at least fifteen feet high, allowing plenty of space for weapons work. Along one wall was a rack of weapons – bo, jo, keibo, tanto, suburito, and bokken, apparently in multiples with different woods for each complete set. There was a stand slightly beyond the rack for holding a single set of wakizashi, katana, yumi, yari, and naginata. Training equipment, including a heavy bag, makiwara board, and three life-size dummies were on the opposite wall from the weapons. With floor dimensions of nearly thirty feet on a side, the

room was impressive – it seemed to be the perfect room for him to work out in.

Harry walked over to the bookcase. If the room was able to fashion itself into what Harry wanted, then hopefully the books would be ones he needed or wanted to read but had not yet had the opportunity to. Scanning the titles, Harry realised that most of these books were the basic texts in the areas they represented. Unfortunately, there was nothing beyond the Hogwarts curriculum in complexity. Apparently the room had been created with some distinct limits on the materials it would provide. He supposed it made sense that you would want to keep Dark Arts books or books on ritual magic and the like far from the hands of students.

Before Harry could become too disappointed, there was a brief flash of flame near the centre of the room accompanied by a rustling sound. Without even thinking, Harry flipped his wand out, made a quick stabbing spiral and called out, “Bleep!” A piece of paper that had been slowly falling to the floor was shredded into small pieces, which were now falling like confetti.

Sighing, Harry walked over to the loose pile of paper bits and flicked his wand through two elaborate sweeps before watching the paper reassemble itself into one sheet. Reaching down, he scanned the contents.

Back in office, please join me as soon as you are able. Password unchanged. – AD

Resigning himself to another day without training, Harry paused on his way out the door to pick up one of his favourite books on the basic philosophy of combat. He would offer it to those who wanted him to teach them how to fight, and if they could grasp the basic points, maybe he would actually consider teaching them.

As he crossed the doorway, however, the book vanished. “Stupid holodeck rules,” Harry muttered. Making his way back to Dumbledore’s office, Harry was mildly surprised to not run into any other students. Even in a school housed in an old castle with only two to three hundred students running around, someone should be in the



halls. Unless, of course, Snape was back early, in which case they would all be either hiding or cheering. Expecting to hear the worst, Harry told the gargoyle the password and walked in just as the Headmaster bid him enter.

Dumbledore looked tired, and there was only a very slight twinkle in his eyes. Gesturing to the chair in which Harry had spent so much of the prior evening, Dumbledore waited for Harry to sit.

“Harry, I am sorry I arrived here later than I said I would, but I have resolved the difficulties you gave me regarding Professor Snape. It took some digging through the archives, but we have turned up filed copies of the original authorization for his use of Legilimency on students here with the Aurors. They have released Severus. If you would like to see it, here is a copy.” Dumbledore held out a scroll toward Harry.

Harry glanced at it, noting that it was close to what Remus had predicted, and shrugged. “So you got Fudge to sign an order of authorization after applying a bit of political pressure, and you had it backdated to when he was hired in the summer of 1987. That was not unexpected.”

Dumbledore rested his elbows on the desk, his fingers steepled. “I have told Severus not to report back to the castle until after curfew tomorrow night. Professor Moody will return with him. This will hopefully give him time to alleviate some of his anger toward you, Harry. As I feared, his unfortunate predisposition has become outright hatred beyond what even your father incurred.”

Harry shrugged again and tucked the scroll into his pocket. “You have said that you trust Snape – you say you trust him with your life. Tell me, Headmaster, do you trust him with the life of everyone in this school, including me?”

Dumbledore nodded. “I do, Harry.”

Harry looked steadily back at the Headmaster. “Do you have our consent to gamble with our lives like that?”

Dumbledore leaned back into his chair, relaxing his hands on the soft padding along the arms. "Harry, I heard of a most simple prank conducted last night affecting two other Gryffindors, Mr Creevey and Mr Finnigan. I believe you are, shall we say, intimately familiar with the situation?"

Harry muttered under his breath about portraits and privacy but nodded at the Headmaster.

"Do you realise that in some places, to be thought of as homosexual can be fatal? That other people will literally inflict barbaric beatings to the point of death for what they consider aberrant behaviour? Or that the rumour that one has slept with another of the same gender, particularly the male gender – double standard that it is – is sufficient to invoke this wrath?" Dumbledore watched Harry quietly.

"Somewhat," Harry said, "I know that some types of people engage in violence against homosexuals, but the same type of people do that to others for reasons of skin colour, religion, political inclinations – you name it. Xenophobia has many forms beyond just physical. Are you trying to tell me there are organized groups of people that do this as a matter of course? And they aren't completely mental?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, Harry, I am. There are tribes of more primitive people still on this planet who do exactly that, and there are groups who subscribe to radical religious beliefs even among the most advanced and enlightened nations that advocate and do as much. So tell me, did you have their consent to gamble with their lives this morning?"

Harry stared at the Headmaster. Floppy suddenly stirred and said calmly, "My point, Mr Potter."

Having once again forgotten that Floppy was even there, Harry was preparing to start flinging curses before he recognized the Hat's voice. Settling back into his seat, Harry felt that he could see where the Headmaster was going, but the comparison between a childish prank that would never be known outside of the castle and harbouring a man who spent years killing and torturing....

“I see your point, Headmaster,” Harry began, “but I respectfully disagree. That prank – which was all it ever was meant to be – was not malicious in intent nor will it be known or remembered within another week. Snape, however, must have killed and tortured in order to even get the Dark Mark, let alone what he had to happily do in order to join the Inner Circle. No matter your beliefs, just those actions that I am aware of him doing here call into serious doubt whether the man has changed from the Death Eater he was.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Severus proved himself to me before I hired him, Harry. I feel the risk from Severus is no different than the risk posed by, say, Professor Flitwick. I would further say that you, rather than Severus, are probably more of a risk to the students.”

At the implied insult, Harry was more than ready to get up and leave. Remus, however, had asked him to give the man a chance, so Harry chose to stay seated and slowly boil inside. “And have you asked Snape about the Dark Mark yet? Or why those Slytherins went unpunished?” The chill in his voice was unmistakable.

Dumbledore shook his head. “In a room full of Aurors, Harry, I was not about to open either of those discussions. I will be meeting with him tomorrow when he returns to the castle. In the meantime, we have delayed constructing the final student timetables until we know how to place you in classes. With your agreement, I would like to use our time before dinner to test your abilities rather than to discuss Voldemort. I would further suggest that our next meeting be tomorrow evening, from right after dinner until just before curfew. My staff and I must finish preparations for the classes starting Monday. Is this acceptable to you?”

Harry nodded briefly. Albus and Harry both pulled out their wands and agreed to the limiting terms of the meeting. Dumbledore then nodded at Harry, as if inviting Harry to begin.

Harry stood up and walked over to the window, absently petting Fawkes as he stood looking out at the afternoon light and the students on the grounds. “Well, to start with, I’m probably woefully unprepared for Herbology as I only really know those plants used in

the potions I've learned. I think Divination is bunk and, therefore, have no working knowledge of it at all. I also think it's safe to say that in Muggle Studies, there is nothing Hogwarts can offer me."

Stretching slightly, Harry turned back to face the Headmaster. "I doubt any Defence Against the Dark Arts class here would teach me anything, but I'm probably about right for Charms and Transfiguration. If anything, I probably know a lot of rather advanced things the other fifth years don't, but lack the basic things they do know – like turning a teacup into a lobster. That's not exactly useful in my life."

Walking slowly around the office, Harry finished his narrative self-assessment. "I know some potions but more alchemy, really, thanks to Nicolas. I suspect that with some tutoring on the side, I can catch up in that area. Ancient Runes – I'm likely well ahead of any students, and my Arithmancy is probably closer to a seventh year preparing for N.E.W.T.s or something. You have a Magical Creatures class, but I only really know the ones you need to understand for DADA. So, I'm probably behind in that for my year level."

Harry scratched absently at the back of his head for a minute. "I can't think of anything else you need to know right now."

Dumbledore rose and gestured to a door in the wall behind his desk. "If you will follow me, Harry, I need to test your skills somewhat to verify your assessment. Also, I have been amused by your interesting choices of incantation when doing magic recently. Please try not to drive the Ravenclaws or Miss Granger insane, Harry." They were walking down a short hallway toward a door at the very end.

Harry shrugged. "Curiosity did kill the cat, Headmaster."

Dumbledore chuckled as he opened the door into his private training area. "And the cat died happy, but I am more concerned with the fact that the cat died in this example. Now, Harry, let us see what you know...."

Nearly four hours later, Harry and Dumbledore were slowly walking down to the great Hall for dinner. Both were breathing a bit heavily and had sweat stains on their clothes, their skin still shining with

beaded perspiration as though they had been through a heavy workout. The Headmaster had a faint limp in his right leg, while Harry was favouring his left arm moderately. "I'm pleased to say your assessment was mostly correct, Harry. I think you might be a little more advanced in Transfiguration and Charms than you thought, however."

Harry gave a half-smile. "Maybe. I'm not the best judge of my own abilities. I'm still trying to understand how you ran through several years' worth of lessons for so many classes in just a few hours. I'm knackered."

The Headmaster chuckled quietly. "I cheated, Harry. I had you doing magic that contained several lesser spells combined. By the way, your duelling style is most unorthodox. We shall have to duel more during the year. I enjoyed that."

Harry shrugged as they arrived outside the doors to the Great Hall. "I'll be in shortly, sir. I want to catch my breath for a moment."

Dumbledore nodded and proceeded into the room for dinner. Harry walked out onto the front steps and made sure no one was in hearing distance. "Floppy?" he asked quietly.

"Mr Potter?"

"The Sorting question – how do you feel about stirring it up a bit?"

The Hat was silent for nearly a minute. "How so, Mr Potter?"

"Put me in a different House for now."

"Why should I? Is Gryffindor deficient in some manner?"

Harry paused to try and verbalize the thoughts that had been cooking in the back of his brain all day. "If the label is irrelevant, and the point is that it's our values that matter, then I want to know what values each group has. How can I do that without living with them and seeing how they interact?"

“You haven’t spent enough time in Gryffindor yet to understand their values, Mr Potter, let alone some other set.”

Harry failed to realise he was shaking his head until Floppy nearly fell off. Pushing the Hat back onto his head, he tried again. “Look, it takes time to internalize knowledge and be able to make generalizations based on it. Rather than spend a month in one house, I’d rather skip among the houses for a bit and work on it in parallel rather than in series.”

Floppy started twirling the tip of the beat up wizard’s hat while remaining silent for nearly two minutes. “Very well, Mr Potter, I’ll consider it – but not until later. You might just try socializing a bit beyond those with red hair to start with.”

Harry chuckled a bit at that pointed remark. “If that’s the best I can get, then that’s what I’ll take. Thanks, Floppy.” Harry felt like smirking as he strolled into the Great Hall. Dinner was just starting, and several students turned to look at him. He may not be getting Sorted into a different House yet, but that had no impact on where he might choose to sit.

Waving in passing to the Gryffindors watching his entrance, Harry walked over to the Hufflepuff table, which seemed to be full of students shocked that he was standing at their table. Spotting an empty seat across from Hannah Abbot, who was sitting at the very end of the Hufflepuff table, Harry dropped into it while smiling at her. “Hello, Hannah.”

Hannah looked back at Harry while glancing around at the other students who were staring at him. Whispered conversations were slowly starting around the room. “Hey, Harry,” she started, “welcome to the Hufflepuff table, I guess.”

Harry nodded his thanks to her. “Pretty quiet reception, although the whole swimming-in-a-fishbowl effect is rather thorough from your house.”

Hannah chuckled at him before pointing to the pretty girl on her left. "This is Susan Bones, a good friend of mine." Harry smiled at her, before Hannah pointed to the boy sitting on Harry's right. "That's Justin Finch-Fletchley, another good friend." Harry briefly shook hands with him, although a bit of awe seemed to be radiating from both Susan and Justin.

As Harry ate his meal with the trio of Hufflepuffs, he noticed that while no one at the table was hostile, no one was particularly welcoming except Hannah. Susan warmed up a bit and started talking more freely in response to Hannah's discussion of various professors and classes, but the conversation remained slightly stilted. Finally realising that he had achieved as much as he could for one evening and that he was only interfering with their normal eating habits, Harry politely excused himself and went back to Gryffindor Tower while most students were still eating. The reaction of the Hufflepuffs in general was something to ponder, since it failed to match both his expectations and what he had been told he could expect in general.

Having the common room to himself, Harry dropped back into the armchair facing the fire and pulled out the book on wards to actually get some quiet reading time in. Turning to the end of the introduction where he had left off, Harry resumed his quest for new information. ... wards must be anchored in something impervious to the heat that will be dissipated in proportion to their strength ... flux buffers can be artificially created when located far from primary feeds, but they require tuning and are limited by influx rates ... impractical to devise a moving ward due to variation in energy patterns and strengths, causing instability in....

"Harry!" Harry looked up to see Ginny smiling at him and Hermione hovering behind her.

"Yes?" His mind was still somewhere in the book. While mobile wards were typically thought impractical due to the energy variations, Hogwarts' unique geography could potentially counter the barriers involved. It might be possible....

"It's late." Hermione gestured to the clock in the corner. "Go to bed!"

Harry looked at it in some surprise. "Huh, I didn't realise it was so late. I guess I got lost in my book." Marking the page and flipping the book closed, Harry rose and stretched before smiling back.

Ginny looked at him through squinted eyes. "What was sitting at the Hufflepuff table about? You weren't trying to make me jealous, now were you?"

Harry looked blankly at her for a moment before laughing outright. "Were you?" Ginny glared at him. Harry just looked back at Hermione. "Thanks, Hermione. G'night."

Ginny shoved him toward the stairs. "Tomorrow is supposed to be a profitable day, Harry, so off with you." Ginny and Hermione then went up their stairs to follow their own advice.

As Harry walked up the stairs, he noticed that each door he passed was colourfully marked with all kinds of indicators for who the occupants were. Apparently, that lesson had been driven in quickly. Shaking his head in silent mirth, he entered his room only to find Seamus sitting on Harry's trunk, twirling his wand.

Seamus saw Harry and shot to his feet. "Potter!"

Harry noticed the other three boys were each lounging about, reading in bed. For some reason, Harry suspected they were more interested in what was about to happen than their books, but this might have only been true for Ron since his was the only book upside down. "Yes?"

Seamus stared at Harry. "I want that film, Potter."

Harry just smirked back. "Why? Don't you want to see how cute you two looked together?"

"No!" The vehemence in Seamus' voice was a little surprising. "I've heard about your little war with the Weasleys! Those two wouldn't hesitate to put those pictures everywhere, so that means you'd do it, too!"



Harry shrugged. "Nah, not my style. I'd rather just hold on to them and threaten you quiet-like when you were doing something stupid." If anything, this seemed to irritate Seamus even further. "Tell you what. Two weeks from tonight, I'll pull out the pictures, and you can decide what to do with them. In the meantime, they stay locked up in my trunk once they get developed. Fair?"

Seamus growled and grumbled but finally relented since, after a full day of trying, he had failed to open the trunk the camera was in. Harry just smiled at him. "Besides, think of it this way. Since you've already been pranked by me, even if a bit indirectly, then you're safe from what I'm going to do to everyone else. The worst is over for you."

Seamus paled a bit at that before going over to his own bed. Meanwhile, the other boys were looking at Harry, their apprehension evident.

As Harry finished his own preparations and lay back in bed getting comfortable, Floppy changed back into the nightcap with the frizzy ball at the end. "I would caution you, Mr Potter."

Harry, still thinking of other things, perked up a bit. "Oh?"

"It only takes one small stone to cause an avalanche, Mr Potter, one that cannot be stopped."

Harry merely shrugged and went to sleep.

oOo oOo oOo

A/N:

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to Chreechree and cwarbeck. Thanks to various people for contributing to the Brit-picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

## Chapter 7: ...in the same direction...

Harry woke up early, the grey pre-dawn light filtering through the window. A slight chill in the air let him know that he was definitely in an old castle somewhere up north and at a higher altitude than what he was used to in the outskirts of Brighton. While clouds dotted the sky, there was less of the oppressive gloom that had marked the previous day. It was a good morning to get up and fly around a bit, to explore the lay of the land around the castle.

Digging into his trunk, Harry got dressed in his usual Muggle jeans and tee-shirt. He also grabbed a jumper just in case the wind became too much. With his attire settled, Harry pulled out his Firebolt from the special case Sirius had made for him. It was designed to let him store the broom at a fraction of its size – when packed, the broom's case was about the size of a regular Muggle notebook.

Harry next pulled out his aufero scrinium - or as he liked to call it, his transporter – from the deeper confines of the trunk. Lifting the lid, Harry was excited to find a bag full of small rings that filled most of the space and a slightly mangled scroll on top of the pile. Pulling out both items, Harry returned his transporter and locked his trunk. Dropping his Firebolt and the bag of rings onto his bed, he opened the scroll to see what his outlandish mentors had come up with.

2 Sep 1995

Our dear Scoundrel in Training:

Here are the five hundred rings you asked for. After some work, we've found we can make them for around half a Galleon each, as the metal is cheap but strong, a type of mild steel the Muggles use. If we can manage to sell about twenty-five hundred of them, we'll be making pure profit at that point. Let us know how well they work, and we can look into ways to market them. It took Edgar and me a while to make them work. As I told you, they won't hold up beyond a superficial look. The magical oath parchment you asked for is inside the bag with an Impervius Charm on it, so it should also be ready for your immediate use.

As for your Snape prank, I let Padfoot work out how to do it and then helped him refine it a bit. We've put two variations on the prank, as well as the Suppression Charm you asked for. The first variation will affect paper rather than clothing, and the second variation will have a very similar effect on water. Having tested it, I think we need to put that in the journal, but only if you can pull it off properly. We expect to see the evidence, right?

Master Gata has asked me to remind you that you need at least two hours a day with him for your martial arts practice and training. He is less than pleased that his promising student has been whisked away, and I fear for my safety if you don't show up by Tuesday afternoon. That man is mean

Edgar and I would like to remind you that we still have a lot of magical theory to work on, and you need to be around for that. While Edgar can see you there, it's probably best that I not visit you at Hogwarts with the laws currently being what they are. Padfoot is whining as I write this. You know your mutt misses you as well.

At any rate, buck up, get the evidence, plan to be back here daily no later than Tuesday, and don't forget— keep your head down!

Your Scoundrels, Pranksters, and Plotters

Chuckling, Harry studied the spell and its two variants, which his friends had created to help him break the shadow of terror Snape cast wherever he went. Quietly laughing outright at points, he tucked the scroll into his main bag, along with the smaller bag of rings, before slinging his bag over his shoulder. Opening the window fully, Harry leaned out with his Firebolt in his right hand and leapt into the sky, pulling the broom under him as he shot off to explore the grounds around Hogwarts.

After relaxing and enjoying the scenery for nearly half an hour, Harry had a rough idea of where all the major fixtures were. Later in the day he might have the chance to poke around Hogsmeade a bit, but otherwise the castle, Quidditch pitch, forest, and lake were clear enough in his mind. As he flew toward the main entrance for breakfast, he took his time gliding over the surface of the water. The

reflection of full daylight hitting the clouds and the bits of sky on the surface of the still lake was quaint in many respects, and it spoke of a certain timelessness that Harry could imagine stretched back to the Founders. He wondered idly if the lake had been there prior to the castle, or if they added it afterward.

Reflecting back on his reading, Harry dropped down on the rocky beach by the front of the castle. Stretching to get his blood flowing again, he studied the seemingly random types of rocks lying around. After a trip to Mexico, he had been amused that the stiff-upper-lip British seemed to think that a group of very small rocks by a body of water constituted a beach in Brighton, whereas anyplace else it would be considered a poor place to relax. There were nicer beaches, like the so-called English Riviera, but the water was a bit on the frigid side. That said, the currents of the Atlantic and the Channel around the Isles left few really desirable beaches. Maybe that was part of why so many people flocked to the soft beaches and the warm waters of the Mediterranean or the Americas for their holidays.

Reaching down, Harry scooped up a handful of two-inch diameter stones and found a small rock made up of mostly quartz, one of mostly granite, and a bunch of others for which he had no idea of their composition. Dropping all but one of the random ones, he pocketed it along with the granite and quartz for later study.

Swinging back onto his broom, he flew back up to the Gryffindor Tower window and entered while the other boys were still having a lie-in on the brisk Sunday morning. Stowing his broom safely, Harry headed downstairs to the common room. He was a little surprised to see all three of his redheaded conspirators chatting quietly while waiting for him.

“Up a little late this morning, eh, Harry?” George asked him as Harry motioned them to the portrait hole.

“Nah, went flying for a while. Wanted to see the area a bit, see where all the ways in and out are, that kind of thing.”

Fred perked up at this. "You didn't ask us to come along? Come now, Harry, you should know that we know all the secrets worth knowing around here." This outrageous statement was followed by a pronounced wink. "Know what I mean?" he asked.

Harry arched one eyebrow as they headed down the main staircase toward the Great Hall. "Really? All the secrets?"

Ginny chuckled quietly while Fred's eyebrows drew down. "Well, all the ones except about you. But we'll work those out soon, won't we, Fred?" Fred looked expectantly at George, who just smiled.

Harry smacked Fred on the back of the head. "You're Fred, Fred. He's George. Are you daft, man?"

Ginny's laughter was a little more pronounced as Fred looked confused. "Here, now, how'd you know that?"

George just said in a monotone, "Trade secret."

Harry winked at Ginny and nodded. The three of them were the first students into the Great Hall, and they had even preceded the house-elves – the tables were still empty of food. Strolling to the far end, away from where most people would sit, Harry sat next to Fred this time while George and Ginny sat across from them. All three watched as Harry silently pulled out his wand and made a few intricate motions before replacing his wand in his right sleeve.

Harry looked at each of them briefly, his eyes finally settling on George. "Right, then, profit or pleasure first?"

Fred smacked Harry lightly. "Profit, you fool!"

While they all laughed, Harry opened up his bag and extracted the smaller bag of rings. Placing his bag back by his feet, he rummaged around in the ring bag until he extracted a piece of parchment folded in half.

"Right. Here's the deal. Err, hang on." Harry pulled his bag back into his lap as he dug around for the paper Dumbledore had given him

last night. “Ah!” Finding it, he placed the bag back at his feet before tapping the much-maligned parchment from Dumbledore with a fingertip.

“This bit of paper is a copy of Minister Fudge’s authorisation for one Severus Snape to use Legilimency on any and all students while they are at Hogwarts to ensure the safety of the student body. Presumably, he’s to ferret out children who are going to use Dark Arts.” Harry slid the note out to the middle of the table and opened it. “Note that it’s signed and dated the day after Snape was hired – 1 August 1987 – and that Dumbledore counter-signed as head of the Wizengamot. This basically gives Snape carte blanche to poke in any students’ heads under the pretence of security and the good of all.”

Harry paused while the three read the order from Fudge. None of them seemed particularly pleased.

“Now, I had Snape arrested because he tried Legilimency on me, which is illegal in any form on any non-consenting target, and much more so on a minor. There are exceptions, and this note counts as one. While I can’t prove it, the odds are that the ink on the original order giving him permission is less than forty-eight hours old. So, the Aurors had to release Snape when Fudge and Dumbledore came up with this letter, right?”

The three looked at him while nodding slowly.

“Dumbledore trusts Snape. I do not, nor, I think, do you. So, what we’re going to do is rain on Snape’s parade, and each of us is going to make some money doing it.” Harry was grinning now. “These rings,” he said, pulling one out of the bag, “are Occlumency Shadows. I had a few of my mentors work this out based on a training exercise when you first learn Occlumency, so they should be perfect for what we want.”

Harry slid the ring onto his right pinky finger, where the ring shuddered slightly before resizing to fit his finger. “Each ring has several properties. Let me explain them in turn. First, they project to

any surface Legilimency scan a perfect shield, as though the wearer is a master Level One Occlumens.”

Ginny looked confused. “What does that mean?”

Harry smiled in response. “Every human mind has a very faint natural barrier to intrusion. Mind reading or truth sensing is the skill to bypass that barrier, which even Muggles can do in a very basic fashion. But when driven by magic through Occlumency, that barrier can be strengthened, such that the initial touch of a mind reader sees walls around the mind, not the thin filmy substance of an unprotected mind. To get past barriers like that requires magic to drive the mind reading, or Legilimency, skills. It then becomes a contest between who has better training and control over their mind, the Occlumens or the Legilimens. Anyway, these rings make a Shadow projection of walls in your mind, so it looks like you are protected to any surface scan. In reality, any actual attempt to read your mind will shatter the image, unless you really do know Occlumency.”

His three co-conspirators looked at each other a bit before looking back at Harry. Ginny was silently elected spokesperson. “Err, what good is that, Harry?”

Harry was grinning evilly. “Well, aside from annoying the hell out of Snape when he decides to probe somebody, not much. What is good is the second enchantment on the ring. It will emit a very audible alarm that lets people know that they are having their mind scanned by a Legilimens.”

Fred leaned over the table. “How audible?”

Harry started laughing. “Trust me.”

The others grinned at each other. Ginny looked back at Harry. “Ok, what else?”

Harry pulled out three rings and placed one in front of each Weasley. “It must be worn on the hand, and I suggest the favoured hand for doing wand work. It has an auto-sizing spell and must not be taken

off once you put it on, or else it stops working. Right? If you take it off for any reason, it won't work again. Clear?"

The other three nodded. Ginny picked up the ring and looked closely at it. A mischievous glint in her eyes, she stared at Harry and said, "Isn't it a little early for you to be giving me a ring, Potter?"

Harry looked puzzled for the briefest second before giving her a wide-eyed smile. "But Gin-Gin, aren't you my 'intended lady'?"

Ginny smirked as she slid the ring onto her finger, while Fred and George were just looking at each other and communing in some silent way.

Harry elbowed Fred sharply to get his attention. "Profit?" he asked.

Fred nodded his head as George and Ginny leaned in. "So here's the final bit. Since my team came up with these beauties, you get to figure out how to sell them. I want one Galleon for each of them. You three keep half the money you receive and then give me the rest. It's more important to me that every non-Slytherin student that is on the side of Light has one than it is that you get full price, so let it be known that a payment plan with zero interest is welcome to people who can't spare a Galleon, and you only need one Knut to hand the ring out with the rest due by the end of the year. Fair?"

The other three were nodding their heads vigorously, quickly realising the mathematics of over two hundred non-Slytherin students each spending a Galleon for a ring.

"Ok, this last bit is the hardest part. This other parchment here," Harry said, sliding out the crisp and clean sheet, "is a magical oath each person has to sign before getting their ring. I want you three to sign it now, but you can have your rings for free. It's a Compulsion Oath that you will: first, never willingly serve any Dark Lord; second, never willingly, with deliberate intent, attempt to permanently harm or control another unless in defence of yourself or others; third, you may defend any property not being used by a Dark Lord, or used as a place to harm or control others; and fourth, you agree to swear by signing your name to make the oath binding. Violators will get



repercussions. That's the first oath. The second oath, which requires a signature in this other column, is relatively minor and says you will not discuss the rings without my permission to anyone not wearing one, and then only after making sure you are in a private area."

The three of them looked slightly uncomfortable. "What happens to oath breakers?" George clearly kept his gaze on Harry's eyes as Harry responded.

"Break the minor oath and you get some nasty messages all across your body about not being trustworthy. It won't come off for a few years, I think. Break the major oath and you'll have problems practicing magic." Harry felt a little bad about being less than honest with them, but he wanted the signatures from the students.

Ginny stared hard at Harry. "What kind of problems?"

Harry looked at his hands for a moment, before placing his hands in his lap and slowly sliding his right wand into his hand. Looking at each briefly in the eyes, he prepared himself to Obliviate them immediately if necessary. "Total inability to cast magic." He reached out and tapped the top of the parchment, and the exact wording of the oath was revealed in the space between the short summary and the signature lines.

The other three paled and became silent. It was nearly two minutes before Harry spoke again. "That's why the word 'willingly' is in the oath. If you're under mind control and unwilling, you're safe. Otherwise, I'm sorry, but I won't give anyone tools – no matter how frivolous – if they might choose to serve evil. The block on magic use can only be reversed by my involvement. I personally have to release you from the oath." Harry carefully chose to overlook the knowledge that magically preventing any creature with a substantial magical core, such as a witch or wizard, from actually being able to release energy from that core was always fatal within a few weeks, and he would never release someone who had abused their power for evil intent.

Harry kept a tight grip on his wand as he continued to watch them. The background noise in the hall was slowly picking up as other students trickled in, but no one had yet come close enough to trigger

the proximity alarms. The three Weasleys were gazing intently at one another, a type of familial speech comprised of twitches, glances, and eyebrows going on between them. Finally, Ginny pulled the parchment in front of her and signed both columns, followed promptly by George and then Fred. Harry slid his right wand back into his sleeve holster.

Exhaling slowly, George watched Harry put his hands back on the table. "Harry, what would you have done if we refused?"

Harry's face became an expressionless mask. "Do you really want to know?"

George swallowed loudly before nodding.

Harry kept his face blank. "Obliviate you, remove the rings, scan your minds for evil intentions and actions, and then possibly turn you over to the Aurors. I need partners I can trust, not traitors with a cheery demeanour. Since you willingly signed that document, I now can trust you to get these rings distributed."

Ginny frowned slowly. "You can trust us with more than that, Harry."

Harry looked at her. "Maybe." The implications were left unsaid, but they were still quite clear to everyone.

The tense atmosphere was broken by the sound of an owl hooting. Confused, Ginny, Fred and George were astonished to hear the sound coming from the table itself.

"Perimeter Charm has been breached," Harry explained and looked up to see Hermione, Ron, Neville, Dean, and Seamus approaching hearing distance of their conversation. Snapping his wand back out, Harry flicked it a few times to cancel the Perimeter Charm. Looking back at the others, he decided it was time to change the topic.

Harry reached for a platter of eggs that had suddenly appeared before him. "Right, so how about some breakfast before we do that bit of lessons afterward, Fred?"

As George and Fred began to banter, Harry ate slowly and tried not to think about how the prior conversation ended. Ginny kept giving him furtive glances, but she opted not to say anything. As Hermione and crew settled in next to him and the others, Harry wondered if he was pushing too hard, too quickly. While he thought that the three Weasleys he was working with were trustworthy to a point, he was far from ready to candidly discuss the current state of events with anyone at Hogwarts, especially not with people he had known for less than forty-eight hours.

As Harry randomly selected bits of fruit, scrambled eggs, soft-cooked bacon, and pumpkin juice, he noticed that Hermione was arranging her breakfast with nearly military-parade precision. Toast, check. Eggs, check, carefully separated from the sausage, check. One dollop of jam, dead centre on the toast, check. A cup of hot tea, no sugar, a dash of cream, check. Two apples, sliced exactly into eight perfect wedges each, check. Each category of food was clearly segregated on her plate with a gap between any two dissimilar items. The care and devotion to little details she was displaying before even beginning her breakfast left him wondering what types of activities she might do for fun.

As though sensing someone watching her, she looked up at and met Harry's gaze. "Good morning, Harry. Will you be staying around for breakfast so we can talk, or are you running off again?"

Harry watched with mild fascination as she held the toast in her left hand, carefully teasing the jam – which looked rather like blackberry – into a perfectly uniform film that exactly covered the bread yet never made contact with the crust. Never taking his eyes off her toast, he jerked a thumb in the vague direction of the Weasley twins. "Err, I'm sticking around, business with the pranksters here."

"Is there something wrong with my toast, Harry?"

Harry looked up at her, noting absently that most of the people around them were delightedly grinning at him. "Do you always eat the same thing in the same manner for breakfast?"

“Except Monday mornings, yes. I’ve found what I like, so I make sure that I eat just that.” Hermione shrugged as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Err, Hermione, do you try new things when you’re travelling?” Harry was almost sure the answer would be no.

“Of course, Harry,” Hermione said in a patient and faintly patronizing tone. “After all, you need to adopt local customs when in a strange place. Sometimes I even find things I like better than what I usually eat, which I always try to get the recipe for. Then I can have it on my schedule.”

Harry blinked a couple of times, while Ginny laughed outright. “Schedule? You have a schedule for your diet?”

Hermione reached into her bag and pulled out a small planner. “Certainly. How else can you maintain a balanced diet if you don’t keep track of what you’re eating?” Everyone else seemed to be calmly accepting of Hermione’s peculiar behaviour, so Harry just gave up and resumed eating his own breakfast.

Hermione, however, had other plans. “So, Harry, can we talk?”

Harry nodded while chewing his bacon, waiting to see what she would come up with. Hermione smiled at him with a hint of excitement showing up on her face, as she delved into her bag again and pulled out a parchment with a long list of questions, as well as a quill and ink.

“Right. First, I wanted to ask you about magic, then about some things on War Mages I found in the library. Is that okay with you?”

Harry glanced at Fred and George and noted they were mostly done with their breakfasts and were studiously trying not to laugh at Harry’s predicament. Ginny was still eating, but would probably be done in another couple of minutes. Harry looked back at Hermione while shaking his head. “We’ve got some things we need to go over shortly, Hermione, so how about if we get through a few questions for now and try to take on the others during lunch, right?”

Hermione seemed a little disappointed at Harry's unavailability, but she was covering it well. "First, you said that the only real question was whether the Chinese had invented Latin. Obviously they didn't. Our spells are based on Latin roots. Are you trying to say that the words are irrelevant?"

Harry smiled at her long route to arrive at a simple question. "Not at all. To learn a spell, the words are very important, even critical. Without the words, you'll never get your magic to work right."

Hermione stared at Harry for a long moment before scribbling down on her parchment. Harry leaned over to see her write down exactly what he said. Rolling his eyes at Fred and Ginny, Harry sat back and looked around as he awaited the next question. Dean and Seamus were talking to the two girls Harry had brushed off during the feast, Larvati and Pavender or some such. Based on the giggles alone, it was something he had no interest in anyway.

"That doesn't make sense, Harry. If the words are important, then how can you make anything work by saying, Tweet, Tweet'?" Hermione was rubbing the side of her head with the back of the quill, staring at her breakfast as though the answer would appear among the orderly food collection.

Harry sighed. "The next question, Hermione, is whether you want me to give you the answers or if you want to puzzle them out for yourself."

Hermione continued staring at her plate before speaking slowly. "I want the answers, yes, but I'd rather understand the answers than have them handed to me. If you think I can't find the answer on my own, like about War Mages, I want you to tell me. For the magic questions, if I can't figure them out, I'll ask you to give me the answers."

Harry could tell this girl was a kindred spirit to Remus and perhaps some others he knew. "Alright, Hermione. Let's go back to your question. You asked about the words. Read what I said and look at it

from the point of view of someone who doesn't know much about magic."

After casually watching Hermione eat her eggs, Harry realised that she never mixed her food. She ate the entirety of one item at a time. While he was pondering which type of food she was likely to eat next, she sat up and looked triumphant. "Ha! You said the words were important for learning the spell. You're implying that they aren't important once you know the spell!"

Harry smiled at her. "That might be the tip of the iceberg. Let me know when you've got that bit figured out, yeah?" Looking back at Ginny and seeing her plate was clean, he looked over at his co-conspirators and gestured out the door. They all got up and walked out of the Great Hall, ignoring the furtive glances that were cast their way and Hermione's glowing expression of new discovery. Fred and George took the lead, with Harry and Ginny falling in behind them as they tread a complex pattern of twists, turns, and staircases to end up outside of an old portrait on the fifth floor.

George motioned them to stop while Fred tapped the portrait with his wand and whispered to the reclining centaur under the trees. The portrait slid aside quietly, revealing a staircase down into darkness. With everyone casting a quick Lumos, they all entered and the portrait closed behind them.

Fred turned around when they reached the bottom of the stairs. The passageway was wide enough for four people abreast if they were comfortable with each other, but otherwise it appeared to be fairly unused. "This is an old way out of the castle that's blocked – the ceiling fell in a hundred feet or so on down. It's a nice little place to hide away from others."

Harry nodded and pulled out the extra sensory monitor he was carrying. After quickly conjuring a temporary table and four chairs, Harry placed the monitor in the middle of the table. "Right, we've got several things to get through. I'm going to teach you how to bind one of these to a willing person, unbind it, activate its recording, and stop its recording. Later, if you guys want to learn, I'll show you how to watch their playback and do a few other basic things with them."

Harry spent an hour coaching the Weasleys before they went their separate ways to plan private mischief.

Strolling back into the Great Hall at lunchtime, Harry was amused to see a single seat open among his new Gryffindor acquaintances. The vacancy was between Ginny and George, and directly across from Hermione, who had her blasted roll of parchment out along with quill and ink. Slightly resigned to his fate of two thousand questions over lunch, Harry dropped into the seat and decided it was time to up the ante a bit.

“Thanks, Ginny love, for saving me a seat next to you. I wasn’t sure if I’d have to ask someone to move or not.” Smiling blandly at Ginny, he was amused to see the glint of fire back in her eyes as she smirked.

“Oh, Harry, I’ve missed you! Here, let me help you with your lunch!” Ginny proceeded to put together a sandwich identical to the one he had made the previous day but been unable to enjoy. “Was that right, love?”

Harry had to admire her skills and was sure she would be a mean poker player. “Close enough, Gin-Gin.” After pouring himself a goblet of pumpkin juice, he was unsurprised when Ginny nicked it from him. “Let me know if I need more in my goblet, right?” he asked her. Taking her goblet and pouring his own drink, he looked over at Hermione to see a faint smirk on her face. “Oh, don’t look at me like that Hermione. Wasn’t that Ron you went into the cupboard with on the seventh floor?”

Hermione’s face went milk white as all the Weasleys except Ron let out a whoop of glee. “Ickle Ronniekins! How long has this been going on?!” Fred demanded. Harry just smiled smugly at Hermione.

“How did you know?” she demanded of Harry. “We’re always careful not to be seen!” Realising her mistake too late, she blushed dark red and tucked her head into her arms, groaning.

Fred and George looked like Christmas had come early. Harry only patted Hermione on the top of her head and gave his patented answer. "Trade secret, Hermione. Sorry."

Ginny looked pointedly at her brother. "And who was it that was telling everyone last year you were just friends? How long has this been going on?" Ron and Hermione were both red faced and refusing to talk, but Harry was amused at their discomfort. Harry watched as the siblings gave each other grief for a few minutes before everyone settled back to eat their respective lunches.

Ginny leaned over and whispered to Harry, "Thanks. You have no idea how long we've been trying to catch them in the act." Harry chuckled in response, watching Hermione absently while he ate the fruit he picked off the serving plates. Reaching down to grab his sandwich, he was flustered to realise it was missing. Ginny, however, had a self-satisfied look as she openly savoured the sandwich she had made for him. "Too slow, Harry. Too slow," she gloated.

Hermione clearing her throat interrupted his plans for the next move against the unpredictable redhead. Harry glanced back at Hermione as she pointedly asked him, "You said we could talk over lunch, right?"

Resigned, Harry just nodded as he assembled his new sandwich. This was difficult as he found himself fending off Ginny's attempts to liven it up with more spices and other ingredients he was unable to identify. Finally giving it up as a bad job, he leaned back and let Ginny go wild. "Go ahead," he said in resignation.

In hindsight, he supposed either girl could have interpreted it the way she wanted, but the identical looks of glee on Ginny and Hermione's faces made him wonder just how much time they spent together.

"So we've established that the words are only important for learning the spell. Once you've learnt the spell, the words are less relevant. You suggested it was the tip of the iceberg, meaning there's a mountain under the simple statement you gave me. So the next question I want to ask you is, what do the words actually do when you're learning a spell?"



Harry sighed as Hermione once again took the long way to ask an easy question. "What are words?"

Ron groaned. "Not this again, please." He looked like someone had killed his favourite pet.

Hermione hit Ron softly on the back of the head. "Just because you never appreciated the argument on whether there can be any thought without communication, Ron, doesn't mean others have the same limits." Harry laughed. "What?!" she demanded.

"You asked me what the words do when you're learning a spell, but you already know the answer." Harry gently pointed out.

"I do?"

Harry nodded. "You just said it." Ginny elbowed him in the ribs and he looked down to see a sandwich with all kinds of things he was unsure of sticking out of it. Taking a hesitant bite, he was pleasantly surprised to find it tasted quite good. Except for the olives. Putting the sandwich back down to pick off the olives, Harry thanked Ginny with a quiet murmur before going back to eating while Hermione kept staring at Harry.

"I did?" she finally asked.

Harry nodded patiently.

Ginny leaned over and whispered, "Did she just say that there can be no thought without communication?" Harry nodded again. "That's what the words do?" Harry smiled at her. "But what thought?"

Harry grinned evilly while eyeing her slowly from head to toe. "Which words?" he whispered back at her. "Sensational? Voluptuous? My Fallen Angel?"

Ginny flushed slightly before hitting him on the shoulder. "Perv. What thoughts do the words trigger when learning spells?"

Harry shrugged absently while he finished off his sandwich. Hermione was now dividing her glare between both Harry and Ginny, although Ginny seemed just as impervious as Harry. Ginny leaned back over to Harry to continue their whispered conversation. "Is that why some spells make you feel funny? Like sad, or happy, or a little bit sick inside?"

Harry paused, wondering at the implications of that statement. Making a mental note to revisit this conversation tonight in his sensory monitor's playback, Harry nodded again at Ginny. "That's part of it. You'd have to be pretty sensitive to pick that bit up, though." Ginny lapsed into thoughtful silence while drinking her juice.

Hermione, however, reached her breaking point. "Ginny figured it out, didn't she?"

Ginny smiled sweetly back at Hermione while Harry kept a half-smile plastered on his face. Hermione just scowled at them. "Fine, then. Let's talk about War Mages since you're not helping me along at the moment."

Harry grabbed another apple and waited for Hermione to start again.

"I read that there are four distinct categories to the War Mage. Student, Apprentice, Mage, and Mentor. You're an Apprentice, since you wear both emblems but not the silver chain of full status, right?"

Harry nodded. That was a fairly basic question with an obvious answer.

"It also said that no Apprentice can be without a Mentor. So who is your Mentor?"

Harry froze for a second. "Was. Who was my Mentor. He's dead now. His name was Nicolas." Harry felt that the full name would just cause undue attention to again focus on him.

Hermione deflated slightly. "I'm sorry to hear that. What will happen now?"

Harry shrugged again. "They'll assign a new Mentor in the October Convocation of the ICW."

Hermione leaned forward, looking a bit more excited. "I wasn't clear on how it is that War Mages are outside the direct control of the Ministry but still fall under the ICW."

Ron leaned in abruptly. "You mean the International Confederation of Wizards?"

Both Hermione and Harry nodded before Harry answered the brown-haired girl's question. "The short answer is that back in 1594, the ICW put forward to the Ministry of each nation participating in the ICW that they should accept the Treatise on International Law and Rule, which created the War Mage title and made all War Mages beholden to the law and courts of the ICW exclusively. Eventually everyone was signatory to it, and that was 1596."

Hermione frowned for a moment. "So you can't be arrested?"

Harry shook his head. "No, that's not true. If I commit a crime by local laws, regardless of what those laws may be, and I am not under mission orders, I can be arrested. The local authorities, however, cannot try me, interrogate me, or subject me to any conditions other than those usually warranted by a simple arrest. I must be turned over to the ICW for all evaluations, and if necessary, punishments. It's rather like the Muggles and their military jurisdiction principle."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. "That makes it clearer. Why don't the books just cite the military system of justice?"

Harry smiled back at her. "How many pure-bloods would understand the reference? Most books are written by or for pure-bloods."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "They could all benefit from a few years of living with the Muggles. Parchment and quills are quaint and fun at first, but after that, they're just tedious."

Harry laughed before asking, "Half-blood or Muggle-born?"

"Muggle-born." Hermione absently turned back to her list of questions, checking off items or making a few notes as she went down the list. "Right, so the next question. I can find several famous War Mages and even mention of battles and wars they were involved with, but nothing actually talks about what you do or how you train. What can you tell us?"

Harry put his head in his hands for a minute to collect his thoughts. Glancing around at all the people deliberately trying to listen in to the conversation, he had little choice on what he could reveal. "Look, I'll tell you a bit, but there are a lot of things I'm not allowed to tell you. I've got things I need to do, too, so this will be the last question for now. You can ask more later, right?"

Hermione nodded eagerly.

"The fundamental basis for being a War Mage, or a War Magus – whichever you prefer to call it – is a deep understanding of right and wrong, with a commitment to always serve the side of the right and to defend innocent people from the wrong. That sounds pretty simple, but it took me over three years of discussions and debates to make it out of the Student stage, which is considered the point where a minimum grasp of right and wrong has been attained. I became an Apprentice about six months ago, and that required a full oath to the War Mage creed. That in turn entitles me to the same protections that full War Mages enjoy. During this phase of my training, I will continue striving to understand right and wrong, which is different from notions of Light and Dark. I'll also begin to train in the style and skills, magically speaking, of the War Mage. So far, I've had little training that wasn't centred on my mental attitude and philosophies."

Hermione, along with most of the others, looked bewildered.

"You don't understand the point of the philosophy, do you?" Harry sighed when they all shook their heads. "What's the number one rule of fighting?" No one answered. "To not get into a fight." They

continued to stare at him like he was spouting Sanskrit proverbs at them.

“The number two rule is to apply as much force as the situation calls for in as fast a manner as possible. The longer the fight goes on, the more chance of losing. Tickling an opponent with a knife is a bad idea. Respond with the force needed, but not more, and end the fight quickly. But above all else, avoid the fight if at all possible. Why should you avoid the fight?”

Harry waited, but no one answered.

“It’s simple. Do you want to die? Getting into a fight is placing your life on the line. You may not think so, but it’s true. When you’re standing up for others, you’re also placing their lives on the line. That’s not something you should risk lightly. Then there is timing and location – this may be the wrong time or the wrong place, where you are inherently at a disadvantage. And until you can understand when it is and when it is not the right time to take that risk, you’re just a liability in any real fight.”

Harry watched them carefully, but he suspected none of them really understood the point yet, or if they would any time soon.

“Right, I’m done for now, Hermione.” Harry stood up and, picking up his bag from the floor, announced he was off to study and would see them later in the day. Leaning over toward George, Harry whispered, “I’ll see you outside that passage at tea time.” Standing up straight, Harry winked at Ginny before saying, “See you later, love. Great sandwich.”

oOo oOo oOo

A/N:

As Chreechree observed: “You’re the worst kind. You’re high maintenance, but you think you’re low maintenance.” ... When Harry Met Hermione.

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to cwarbeck and Chreechree. Thanks to random people for their aid with Brit-picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

## Chapter 8: ...until opposed

Arriving outside the Come and Go Room, Harry again summoned his private training room. Walking inside, he cast Perimeter Charms on the outside of the door so that he could work without fear of intrusion.

He placed his three rocks from the lake shore on the desk along with the book on wards. Turning back to the book's discussion of buffers and moving wards, Harry studied the diagrams and theories before picking up the first rock, a mostly opaque collection of white quartz.

Harry carefully began the complicated ritual of casting the most basic Spell-Draining Ward. He directed the ward at the area around the rock, with the rock as the anchor. Even though it was a straightforward spell, Harry still felt a little drained after setting the ward. Wiping his brow absently with the back of his sleeve, he studied the rock closely and could see a faintly glowing aura around the tips of the quartz protrusions.

Harry backed away from the desk before casting a basic low-energy hex at the rock. "Rictusempra!" he incanted while carefully controlling his magic. The glowing energy signature impacted on a flickering golden shield, which had suddenly appeared about two feet in front of the rock and then dissipated. Harry walked over and felt the rock, noticing its slight warmth.

For his second test, Harry opted for a more powerful curse. "Incendio!" he called out. The energy impact caused the golden shield to flare brightly before collapsing and flickering. The shield had weakened the curse but was unable to block it, so the curse left a scorch mark on the wall.

Harry sank to the floor and consulted the book. Seeing that his observations matched the book's assumptions, he decided to add motion into the experiment. Tossing the rock in a gentle arc, he cast the tickling hex at it again. This time, the shield flared brightly but only weakened the curse; it failed to absorb it entirely.

After consulting the book's instructions on adding buffers to strengthen wards, Harry went through the ritual to embed a buffer

and link it to the magical field. He was surprised at how tired it left him; he was breathing heavily and sweating freely. He wondered why the book failed to mention how much effort it took to place wards. Then again, the book had come from Dumbledore's private library, so he surmised that the intended readership knew better than to randomly experiment with setting wards.

Harry stood up to once again cast a Tickling Hex at the rock and watched the shield flare to absorb the entire curse. The Burning Hex, he was pleased to note, was likewise completely absorbed, but he was a little worried at how warm the rock felt.

Stepping away from the rock, Harry concentrated on his magic and called out, "Reducto!" The heat he felt from the drain on his core let him know just how substantial that curse was. Watching with morbid curiosity instead of ducking for cover, Harry saw the curse hit the shield, causing the rock to split into roughly four small pieces with a muffled crack! The curse smashed into the far wall where it left a deep pocket in the stones.

Sighing, Harry pulled out the small piece of granite to restart his experiments. Certain it was going to be a long afternoon before he met George for tea, he cast a delay alarm on the door to alert him ten minutes before tea time and then returned to his efforts.

The sudden screeching of the door made Harry realize that it was time to meet George and, quite possibly, Fred. Having destroyed both the quartz and granite rocks, he found that the unknown rock would take a buffer and weak ward. This simple rock also seemed to work whether it was stationary or mobile. Unfortunately, it was also somewhat erratic, regardless of the amount of motion, which was not what he had hoped for. Tonight he would have to write Remus about his experiments and see if he or Edgar could come up with any ideas. Putting the rock in his left pocket, he packed away his failures and the ward book before heading down to the secret passageway the twins had shown him that morning.

George was already nonchalantly loitering at the entrance by the time Harry showed up. They both entered the dark passage and lit their wands to make their way through it. Harry conjured a comfortable



recliner based on a model he had seen in a shop, with a foot rest that popped out, before turning his attention to George, who had just managed to conjure a straight-backed wooden chair.

Harry dropped into his plush recliner, waiting for George to either stop pacing or start speaking. It was clear that, for a bloke that came across as mostly happy-go-lucky, George was working himself up for something major. In all probability, Harry was about to hear the Big Brother Protection Speech #43-A, followed by the Riot Act About Little Sister #2-D. Of course, both speeches would be a waste of time, but Harry would try to get George as completely worked up as possible before pointing out the reality of the situation.

George finally stopped pacing and sat down on the rather stiff and uncomfortable desk chair, much like the ones filling Hogwarts' classrooms. "Look, Harry, we need to talk about some difficult things. Fred and I have gone back and forth over how to do this, and this is the best we could come up with. We want you to hear what we have to say, but more importantly, we want you to listen to what I'm trying to tell you. Don't take it personally, right? I want you to sit there and be quiet until we finish."

Harry shook his head for a moment, trying to work out if George was going to give him a talk about Ginny. "Is this some kind of weird approach on the over-protective big-brother talk? You're wasting your time. I'm not interested in going out with your sister."

George sighed and looked at the ceiling. "Harry, we don't care one way or the other about that. We will talk about that this afternoon, but Ginny is a big girl. She can see who she wants. If her boyfriend makes the colossal mistake of stepping over the line, her six big brothers will take care of whatever she leaves behind. Right? Now, be quiet and let us tell you what you need to know."

Harry shrugged and settled back in his chair. Clearly, things were not going along expected lines.

George continued staring at the ceiling as he began slowly talking. "Alright, consider this... if you want to marry a woman who is English, a witch, and within a few years of your age, then chances are that

she is here at Hogwarts right now. Why do you think so many of us get married within a couple of years of leaving school? We all go out a lot while we're here, but we know that if we don't find our potential mate at school, then we're out of luck for a witch. A lot of us want someone who's also magical to share our lives with, otherwise all kinds of problems can come up with the dynamics of a family. If you don't find your potential partner here, there's very little choice unless you're going to marry a Muggle or you don't plan on sticking around in England, see?"

Harry, more confused than ever about the sudden turn in conversation, decided to just shrug noncommittally.

George now turned his gaze directly at Harry. "Now, because of the war with Voldemort, the number of young witches and wizards in our age bracket is unusually low – it used to be double that of the present population. But think about the numbers – there are about forty students here in the school right now in your year. If we were living in ideal conditions, that number would probably be around eighty students, maximum. If we add those who attend the smaller schools or remain home-schooled, that makes a staggering one hundred and twenty people your age, give or take."

Harry watched as George stood up to pace again. "Given the fact that only about half of that number are female, and that most of them are here at Hogwarts, there is a very high probability that the person you'll eventually marry is somewhere in this building right now."

Harry nodded. "I rather fail to see where this conversation is headed."

George held up a hand. "Bear with me, Harry. I promise, there is a point to all this." He sat down again and continued his discourse. "Okay, in case you didn't know, most wizards and witches live to be maybe a hundred years old, and some of the really powerful ones may make it to a hundred and fifty years or more, but that's very rare. So you're looking at a combined magical population of witches and wizards of at best twelve thousand people in all of England. That means under good conditions, about one out of every five thousand people is magical."

George stopped talking and started playing with the trim on his robes. Harry waited patiently as George gathered his thoughts. "You're a celebrity of sorts, but only in the Wizarding world, Harry. The reason everyone knows your name is because there are so few of us, just that twelve thousand or so. What you did changed everything for all of us. Every magical being was affected in one way or another, good or bad."

George shifted around for a moment, trying to get more comfortable.

"I want you to think for a moment about what it's like growing up in a magical family, Harry. I know you didn't get the chance to, but think about it, especially from the point of view of girls around your age, Harry. This is going to be hard for you to understand."

George frowned at Harry for a moment. By now, Harry was completely confused. George had him baffled. What was he going on about?

"Let's only consider girls that are within a few years of your own age, right? These girls were born during the incredibly stressful end of the war with Voldemort, or during the euphoric period right after his downfall. Times were still hard at that point, but the world seemed a lot brighter because you suddenly brought hope back for all of us, Harry. You became a hero to many Wizarding families. It didn't matter that you were too young to even realize what you had done. It isn't about reality, Harry. It's about the fact that one little boy brought down the monster that so many others before him had tried but failed to destroy. That the little boy lost his parents made his situation even more tragic and romantic. You were a true, honest, proven knight in shining armour, and, as such, you starred in bedtime stories in many wizarding homes."

"Before you came along, the only heroes girls could fantasize about were blokes who had been dead for centuries, or were so old that they might as well be dead also – like Dumbledore." Harry gave an appreciative snicker at George's last comment.

“And then suddenly, here you were – the Boy-Who-Lived, the perfect person to dream about and sigh over. Poor little orphaned Harry Potter who triumphed over the evil villain.” George wiped away an imaginary tear. “You became every young, and maybe not so young, witch’s fantasy – the gallant knight who would sweep them off their feet and carry them off into the sunset. That one was a popular story, but, ugh, some of the fantasies we’ve heard about you... well, never mind.”

George flushed as he appeared to recall some of the more disturbing stories about Harry that he had listened to when he was younger. Harry, in turn, felt his cheeks burn, his imagination of what those dreams about him might have implied sufficiently embarrassing.

George cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Okay. Now you’re this hero, this knight in shining armour, come to save everyone, and at the same time, you’re sent off to live with your Muggle relatives. The air of mystery becomes even more palpable. No one knows what’s going on with you despite your being the wizard of the hour. For years, the only information we could obtain about famous Harry Potter came from what the papers would print about you, and they were mostly rumours about where you were, what you looked like, unsubstantiated sightings, that sort of rubbish. Despite the lack of accurate information, no one was willing to let go of your story and let your name fade into the background.”

George started to look rather uncomfortable. “This was especially true of the Ministry of Magic. That lot exploited your fame to further its own reputation. They soon realized that the mere mention of your name boosted morale and kept people from asking too many questions about their own shortcomings. They could get support for whatever they wanted to do. It wasn’t right; it wasn’t fair, but that’s the way it happened. With me so far?”

Harry felt torn between amusement and disgust. He had never had any love for the Ministry, and these revelations only confirmed his low opinion of them. Taking Harry’s silence as permission to continue, George restlessly rose to his feet before resuming his narrative.

“One of the biggest headaches of the Ministry was this pure-blood fixation by some of the old Wizarding families. They’ve always campaigned for discrimination against those witches and wizards who were not of pure wizarding stock. This idea has been around since the beginning of time in one form or another, but it was always done in the background, with bribery and well-placed proponents in the Ministry. All of this changed with Voldemort – he openly declared war on those who were not pure-blood.”

George gazed at Harry, his face grave. “We were told stories about how kids weren’t even allowed out of the house to play. It simply wasn’t safe to be out on the streets, or even in our own garden. All that changed when you defeated him. After his downfall, things got better. Kids were allowed to visit friends, run around where they wanted – everyone breathed a sigh and relaxed. The evil wizard was gone.”

“A few years before you were supposed to enter Hogwarts, the rumours and whispers started again. People began disappearing; most were never found. A few did turn up, but they were too far gone – their minds empty husks. Very few people were aware of these disturbing events, as the Ministry took great pains to keep everything quiet, but our dad works in the Ministry, so we heard what was really happening.” George drew himself up proudly. “Our family has always held that the purism dogma is crap, so we’re reviled by the purists as blood-traitors.”

George snorted scornfully and ran his hands through his hair. Harry felt like a front-row spectator to a man talking himself into getting a gun and shooting some people. “The blood-purists started talking and acting more assertively, especially those families who had initially claimed that they had been placed under the Imperius curse by Voldemort. One of those families – the Malfoys – used their money to make sure that they always had the ear of the right people in the Ministry. Fudge is practically eating out of Malfoy’s hands.”

“When that prat Draco Malfoy showed up at Hogwarts, it signalled the beginning of a dark period. People who spoke out against his family or against the importance of being a pure-blood would

suddenly find themselves having all sorts of little problems – losing homework, ‘tripping’ down the stairs, nasty rumours – you get the idea. By the end of his second year, they weren’t little things anymore. We started noticing the older Slytherin students doing his bidding, but we don’t know if they’re part of some power hierarchy or if they’re hired muscle. The Malfoy coffers run deep, and with Voldemort gone, it seems like maybe Lucius Malfoy is setting himself up to be the new number one and is trying to recruit new followers to his cause.”

“People were harassed a lot, and in the last two years alone, the bullying has become increasingly physical in nature. We complained, but since Snape handled any grievances, there’s been no form of investigation whatsoever. The situation here was tense – there were all these incidents, and no one could stop them. There was no evidence, and the accused always had alibis. We decided to take matters into our own hands. We started pulling more pranks to get back at the Slytherins in general and Malfoy in particular.”

George stopped pacing to pull back his robes and show some faint marks across the left side of his ribs. “Most of us have taken a few hits, or maybe a busted bone or two. That’s fine for us blokes, I suppose. By the time events had become really serious last year, the students had been conditioned to not bother reporting anything short of attempted rape or murder. It was very crafty, the gradual increase in the frequency and intensity of events. I hate to say it, but even we gave up trying to do anything about it aside from pranks.” George looked guiltily at Harry. “We didn’t even try to tell our parents anymore, mostly because there was little they could do without tangible evidence, and the Slytherins were always very careful to leave none. It was a desperate situation for everyone.”

George covered himself up again. “The girls, however, are another matter. They were also threatened and harassed, but a lot of them – some of the boys too – held out hope that when you, Harry Potter – their knight in shining armour – finally made your appearance, you would save them, and Hogwarts would once again be a place that was fun and exciting. When you never appeared... well, all kinds of rumours were flying around, some positive, many negative, quite a few suggesting you were going Dark yourself.” George shrugged.

“Reality sunk in. After a while, all they really wanted was someone to help them hide, help them go unnoticed, and to try to survive. Their hero never arrived to save them. No one was going to take on the forces of darkness for them. He just wasn’t there. It was as if he turned his back and walked away, but no one understood why.”

“Do you know what that did to them, Harry?” George shot Harry a penetrating look, who stared back calmly. “Your non-appearance crushed their hopes.”

Harry felt profound anger that anyone put him on some silly pedestal as well as the faintest traces of shame. What he so wanted to prevent was happening anyway.

Seeing Harry’s expression, George hurriedly added, “We’re not trying to blame you, Harry. You have every right to live your life the way you want. You did nothing wrong, but because of your legend, you were larger than life. When they needed you most, you weren’t there. We’re telling you this so you’ll understand how things are.”

Harry suppressed a sigh of irritation. George had rambled on for a good ten minutes or so, and Harry had yet to see the point he was trying to make. George stopped pacing and collapsed back into his chair, almost seeming to deflate in front of Harry.

George had an almost wistful expression on his face as he resumed talking, his voice low and strained. “Fred and I, we can’t claim to know how deeply all these goings-on have affected the students – no one likes to talk about what happened to them. We can’t even tell you what happened to Ginny, but we will tell you what we do know. We’re not doing this to break any confidences. We’re doing this so you won’t go and do something stupid, right?”

Since George was obviously expecting some reaction from him, Harry slowly nodded his head. This was definitely not the conversation he had been expecting.

“For lack of a better example, let’s talk about my sister. Growing up, Ginny was a spunky and friendly girl. She wouldn’t hesitate to pull a

prank, she talked a lot, and she was a right little hellion most of the time. She had to be, in order to survive having six older brothers and be noticed. It helped that Ginny harboured very powerful uncontrolled magic. Trust us, you don't want to get on her bad side." George shook his head and smiled. "But Ginny was just as quick to defend us and lend a sympathetic ear if you were hacked off over something."

George leaned back in his chair, his face becoming serious again. "When Ginny arrived at Hogwarts, she was as excited as anything to finally be here. Unfortunately, over the first three years, we watched her slowly change from the Ginny we knew and loved to a shadow of her former lively self. She hardly participated in anything beyond Quidditch after a while, no matter how hard we tried. She kept insisting that everything was alright. We didn't know what to do."

George held his head in his hands now, and though his voice was a little muffled, it was still clear how unpleasant his memories were. "And then something happened about half way through last year. She skipped dinner one night. When she showed up for breakfast the next day, she begged us to let her go home. We suspect that she had a nasty confrontation with Malfoy and his goons, but we couldn't get her to talk. We were able to calm her down after a while, but it took the rest of the weekend for us to realize that something really bad must have happened for her to be so adamant about going home. There wasn't any real physical evidence of anything, but emotionally, she was a complete mess."

"She wasn't doing very well in her classes, she avoided talking to anyone, and she steered clear of the Slytherins. We made sure at least one of us or someone she trusted was with her at all times because we noticed that those tossers seemed determined on stalking her. It got a little rough when she wasn't looking, but we kept her as safe as we could."

"She was like that for about a month or so, and then some of the old Ginny seemed to resurface. She became obsessed with learning how to fight back – both magically and the Muggle way. She was always asking us and the Muggle-born kids to teach her stuff. We didn't



really know more than what they taught us in class, but we tried anyway.” George shrugged.

“We made an effort to keep her spirits up, encouraging her interest in defending herself. She pestered us non-stop to show her more hexes and curses, and she devoured defence texts. We reckon she realized no one was going to save her, so she had better learn to save herself. We tried to keep her spirits up, but she knew that we hadn’t been there when it counted and that it would happen again. Our old Ginny never really came back, Harry, but we’re learning to live with this new Ginny. Mum was in a right state this past summer, not knowing how to handle her own daughter.”

George leaned back in his chair. Harry had no idea how to react to this information, but he could tell George had more to drive home.

“So now we come to today. We want you to think really hard about what’s happened since you showed up on that train, Harry. You came in, the lost knight, shrouded in mystery, and literally took on three of the worst Slytherins. You overpowered them, got them chucked out, and had them arrested, just like that.” George snapped his fingers for emphasis.

“Then, for an encore, you challenged the Head of Slytherin House, the slimy git, and took him down as well. You’ve taken on the bad guys, you’ve won the first round, and, according to our Quidditch girls, you’re a right handsome bloke. What do you think is going on in everyone’s mind right now – all those people who had given up hope, all those girls who fantasized about you – what do you suppose they’re making of this entire ruckus you’ve managed to stir up in just two days?”

George leaned forward and stared hard into Harry’s eyes. “It may not even matter to you, Harry, and it sure as hell isn’t fair, but because of who you are – whatever you do, be it as trivial as breathing loudly – all your actions have repercussions. You need to realize just how much the people out there need you, whether you like it or not. So whether you’re here to stay or just passing through, try not to act without thinking first, yeah?”

Harry merely raised his eyebrows at this, his expression as neutral as he could make it.

“We’re speaking on behalf of all the students, and we are especially asking for Ginny’s sake. She was completely broken after her encounter with those berks, and it was hard to watch and not be able to do anything about it. She’s been slowly recovering ever since. Her behaviour yesterday and today was a surprise to us – we haven’t seen her so... so Ginny since she started school five years ago. We want her to stay that way. Don’t make things worse. We’re begging you as her brothers, Harry, please, please, don’t make things worse.”

George sat up straight and stared vacantly for a long minute. “Right, well, there’s nothing else we can think of, except...” His face split into a wide grin as he looked back at Harry. “I suppose you realize you’re the most desirable boyfriend a girl could have right now, eh? And when you think about that whole population, going out, and marriage thing... your life is about to get rather interesting, Harry.”

George stood up and stretched his lanky frame. “And Harry, if you and Ginny do decide to go out and not just flirt outrageously, well, that’s between the two of you. We’re just going to warn you about one thing. She still has bouts of accidental magic, even though that’s supposed to stop once you start magical schooling. She’s gone out with a couple of guys briefly, but they have a strange way of ending up in the hospital wing after each date. Romantic, eh? Don’t hack her off, and you’ll be fine. Of course, you’ve already hacked her off, so... cheers, Harry. I’ll just leave you to ponder things, then, shall I?” Not waiting for an answer, George started walking back toward the staircase.

Harry called out, causing George to pause at the bottom of the stairs.

“Hey, George. I’ll let you in on a secret. You want to know why I’m here now?”

George nodded, his face curious.

“Voldemort’s back. Thanks for the pep talk, by the way.”

Harry rose from his recliner and walked over to George, who was staring at him in utter disbelief. Harry clapped him on the shoulder and continued up the stairs.

“I’ll just leave you to ponder things, then, shall I?” Harry said, mimicking George’s earlier flippant tone. He smirked briefly before strolling out into the hallway, leaving a shocked-looking George staring after him in mild horror.

As Harry walked down the hallway, he decided that some fresh air would do him a world of good. In some ways, George’s information had been expected and even known, but he had to admit that he had been disturbed by some of the revelations.

Harry was troubled by the realization that even though he had tried his best not to let innocent people like Ginny Weasley become victims of the ongoing battle with Voldemort, they had suffered and were still suffering from the consequences of the war. He might not be the direct cause of the events in question, but the timeline George had presented matched too closely with his activities to be called a coincidence.

As he exited the castle, a voice spoke in his ear. “Well, Mr Potter, what do you think about that?”

Harry was less than surprised that Floppy suddenly decided to start talking again. The Hat would always poke and prod him after he learned something new, which, given his track record, typically meant something unpleasant.

“I think George is right, Floppy. They made me a hero, and then they fault me for not living up to their expectations. It’s not particularly fair. I didn’t ask for it, and I find the entire situation hypocritical.”

Floppy was silent until Harry reached the edge of the lake and started walking around it. "Perhaps, Mr Potter, the only person to not think of you that way is you."

Harry wanted to tear the Hat off and give it a good dunking in the lake, but he doubted it would appreciate the frustration he was feeling even if he did so. "I don't care what others think, Floppy. I don't particularly need any of these people. I just don't want them to be fodder for that evil snake's plans."

The Hat fell silent. Harry continued his walk around the lake, knowing the Hat was waiting for just the right moment to land a killing verbal blow and then it would go back to ignoring him. Realizing he had no desire to eat with the other students, Harry decided to head into the kitchen for a private dinner.

As he crossed the path up to main entrance, Floppy abruptly stirred. "Regardless of what you may think, Mr Potter, you need these people."

Despite Harry's deliberate insults, barbs, and loaded statements, Floppy refused to say anything more on the topic of George's monologue. Studying the remains of his dinner, Harry felt uncomfortable both with his attempts to bully Floppy into talking and the unease that had been settling over him since George gave him a level of insight that he wished he never had earned.

The elves' sudden scurrying about and loud chatter made him look up. He saw Dumbledore walk into the kitchen, his blue eyes twinkling as he caught sight of Harry.

"Ahh, Harry, I was told you might be here. Dinner is over and most of the students have returned to their common rooms. Shall we proceed to our meeting?"

Conceding that today was doomed to be a string of mild setbacks and partial successes, Harry thanked the elves for dinner and followed the Headmaster back to his office. After securing the room, Dumbledore looked at Harry for a long moment before starting the conversation.

“While I am disappointed, Harry, that young Mr. Malfoy and his friends have been expelled and we must resign ourselves to their choices, I am learning to be thankful that they are no longer here. I have spent some time going over the reports from Madame Pomfrey, and I am disturbed by what I have found. As you have repeatedly suggested, I have many questions for Severus when he arrives tonight. In the meantime, there are repercussions happening based on your actions.”

Dumbledore reached into his desk and pulled out a long golden chain with a heavily embossed pendant in a mixture of red and green. Dumbledore put it on, the engraving of Merlin’s Staff on one side clearly visible.

Recognizing the pendant as the symbol of office of the head of the ICW, Harry rose to his feet to hear what official news was going to be conveyed.

Dumbledore adjusted the pendant around his neck and began speaking. “As Supreme Mugwump for the International Confederation of Wizards, I hereby notify you, Mr Potter, that the War Mage Committee is meeting one week from today. You are to Apparate to Geneva at two o’clock in the afternoon, local time, in order to discuss recent events. Moreover, Mr Potter, as you are not yet a full War Mage, a temporary Mentor, Cyril Feiner, has been assigned to you, and he will be here tomorrow evening to discuss your training. Normally this would have waited until the October Convocation, but given events over the summer and this past Friday, the Committee felt this was the prudent interim measure. You have permission to continue as per your current instructions unless told otherwise by myself after a vote of the ICW body, or if you receive a signed document from the Committee, or if your mentor Cyril gives you new instructions. Do you understand these directions?”

Harry was surprised that no efforts were being made to curtail his level of privileges. “Yes, Mugwump, I do, and I agree to comply with each item you have indicated.”

Dumbledore nodded briefly. "So mote it be, Mr Potter." After Dumbledore removed the heavy chain and placed it back in his desk, Harry sat back down, feeling more comfortable. So far, the repercussions were surprisingly light for taking on Malfoy.

"With that bit out of the way, I was also asked to pass along a brief message from Cyril. He asked me to tell you that your sense of subtlety is reprehensible. Of course, this is a bit of a double-standard, coming from the man who prevented the battle at Bastione from becoming a slaughter by challenging Grindelwald's forces to individual melee combat."

Harry had to laugh a bit about the rather uptight Englishman. Cyril was a friend of Nicolas, and Harry was looking forward to seeing him again, even if he was prone to the disease of gross understatement of facts in any situation.

"Now, Harry, on to matters closer to home." Pausing to Summon his tea set and pouring both of them a cup, Dumbledore leaned back to watch Harry. "You know, the reason I always have tea on is that the heat of the cup makes my hands feel warm. A drawback of age, Harry, is that your circulation becomes poor. Age makes many things in life more complicated, does it not?"

Harry slowly nodded, wondering if Dumbledore was trying to make a point in the obtuse manner Floppy favoured. It was a paradox that as the ability to use magic improved as one grew older, the physical deterioration of the aging body meant that one was less able to perform magic. Harry thought people like the Headmaster might secretly believe that magic, like youth, was wasted on the young.

"Mr Crabbe and Mr Goyle are being released tomorrow, Harry, and their parents have enrolled them in Durmstrang. Lucius Malfoy has spent quite a bit of money covering the legal costs, and he is using the law firm I think you yourself have used on occasion – Celer and Manus, I believe?"

In response, Harry simply grinned broadly at the Headmaster. Dumbledore appeared confused by Harry's unusual reaction to his news, but he continued talking.

“Very well. Lucius is also spending a tidy sum trying to keep his son and heir out of Azkaban. He is also lubricating the wheels of the Wizengamot, trying to get some favourable legislation enacted to keep minors from facing full charges for their actions.”

If anything, Harry's grin became even wider, and it now contained a hint of maliciousness. Dumbledore frowned at Harry. “Is there anything you wish to tell me, Harry?”

Harry shook his head and, knowing he was grinning like a fool, motioned for the Headmaster to continue.

“Lucius, along with the parents of Mr Crabbe and Mr Goyle, has also complained to the Board of Governors. They, in turn, told him to discuss it with the Ministry, since they had no grounds to overturn the punishment of expulsion and because War Mages fall outside their purview. Their complaints at the Ministry were directed to Fudge, who in turn directed them to the ICW since he has no authority either. The ICW is presently ignoring them, pending a report from the Committee after your meeting with them next weekend. This, of course, has brought me into the situation as Supreme Mugwump, Harry. Lucius' power does not extend well onto the continent, so most of the ICW is quite immune to his status here. That said, if Lucius decides to take more direct steps to protect his son from the Dementors, then I cannot say what will happen.”

Harry was openly chuckling now. “Let me guess, Headmaster. Lucius is draining his liquid capital rapidly, which is going to displease Voldemort when he finds out. Meanwhile, when Lucius becomes truly desperate, he will either try to ram shoddy legal reform through the Wizengamot or attempt to attack the families of the ICW body. In the first case, well, he'll not like what happens. In the second case, the ICW will officially declare war on Malfoy and those who follow him, and that means that the truth about Voldemort's return will come out.

Then both the English Ministry and the ICW will have a hard bed to lie in, given their recent actions.”

Dumbledore was staring at Harry as if wishing he could use Legilimency to get straight answers. “Are you implying that you orchestrated this series of events, Harry?”

Harry was still chuckling, but he was shaking his head as well. “Not at all, sir, not at all. I made no effort to orchestrate these events.”

Dumbledore leaned back and again studied Harry from around tented fingers. “Very well, Harry. I shall think about this, and perhaps later we can discuss how best to have Voldemort’s return acknowledged. In the meantime, we have nearly two hours before I must prepare to meet with Severus. Before we talk about your training, is there anything you need to discuss with me?”

Harry leaned back in turn and stared at the ceiling for a few moments. “Yes, actually. I’d like unrestricted access to all the material in the library.”

Dumbledore blinked before slowly nodding. “Very well, Harry. I can see the rationale, but I ask you to be careful, as some of the material in those books is not to be taken lightly.” Drawing out a parchment, Dumbledore wrote a short note to authorize Harry’s free access. Harry accepted the note with a nod and slid it into his bag.

“Let us then discuss your training. You mentioned previously that you have other tutors you need to see. Can you provide days and times?”

“Pretty much every weekday, from about four pm until nearly eight pm, Headmaster. I will be leaving for those lessons via secure Portkey that will be set to work just outside the Hogwarts gates.”

Dumbledore pulled out a parchment that had a timetable on it and wrote in the training times Harry had indicated. “And we shall have our meetings from eight pm until curfew. Is that acceptable?”



At Harry's nod, Dumbledore added the designated days and times and handed him the parchment. "This is your schedule, Harry. You will receive it officially tomorrow morning during breakfast, but for now let me explain a few things. Your schedule is in two patterns, the Monday-Wednesday-Friday group, and the Tuesday-Thursday group."

"With the first grouping, your first period is Herbology theory with Mr Longbottom – he's the most advanced student in your year and should be ideal for it. Following that is a double period of practical Herbology, to be held in the greenhouses. Next will be Care of Magical Creatures tutoring with Miss Weasley, as she has the best marks in your year and a bit of a natural touch, I suspect. Following this will be lunch, then a single period of Care of Magical Creatures practical. After this, you'll sit through a single lesson of Defence Against the Dark Arts. While I doubt you will learn anything new, I think it would be good for you to see how the class is taught here, what your peers know, and to get to know Professor Moody. You'll have your afternoon free after three pm, as you are overqualified for other subjects."

"The second grouping will start with a double lesson in Charms, followed by a double lesson in Transfiguration. You will have lunch, followed by a single lesson tutoring period in Potions, taught by Miss Granger. I have also arranged for Mr Longbottom, Mr Weasley, and Miss Weasley to join you for this, as they also could use the extra study. After this tutoring, you will have a double Potions lesson. You will again be free after four pm. Do you have any questions, Harry?"

Harry looked up. "Have the students agreed to tutor me, sir?"

Dumbledore smiled in response. "I asked them during dinner, Mr Potter. They were happy to offer their help, and Miss Weasley was most taken with the idea. I believe she said something to the effect of 'I'll teach him how to properly take care of magical beings.' It seems a rather vague statement, does it not?"

Harry started laughing at the image of Ginny saying that with the mischievous glint in her eye. "As you say, sir, as you say. This

schedule seems fine to me.” Mentally, he was preparing to read as much about the care of magical creatures as he could, since this was a perfect opportunity for Ginny to get her desired payback. Harry handed the schedule back to the Headmaster, who placed it into one of the four piles of student schedules on his desk.

“Very good, Harry. Now, with what time remains to us, I wish to—” Dumbledore was cut off as his door suddenly burst open.

Severus Snape strode into the room, and Harry was almost certain that sparks shot from cloven feet with each step he took and that smoke exuded from his ears. “Headmaster, I have – Potter!” Snape spat out as he caught sight of Harry. “The brat who thought he was better than a professor! I’m so looking forward to our time together, Potter!” Snape stopped in front of Harry, his hand reaching for his wand.

Harry shot to his feet with a wand in his right hand, his back to the solid wall. Fawkes began trilling a soothing melody, but Snape only glared harder at Harry. Dumbledore quickly rose to his feet. “Severus! You were not to return until after curfew! Explain yourself!” he said in a thunderous voice.

Snape sneered at Harry before looking back at the Headmaster. “Moody was called to investigate a major disturbance near his home, and he sent me here to ask for your aid.”

“Very well.” Dumbledore shot Snape a warning glance, and the Potions master slowly lowered his wand, still looking balefully at Harry.

“Harry, if you would please return to your House for the evening, Severus and I must deal with this.” Pulling out an old teacup, Dumbledore tapped it with his wand and said, “Portus.”

After both Dumbledore and Snape had disappeared, Harry put his wand back in his sleeve and turned to leave.

Storming out of the Headmaster's office, Harry fought hard to control his anger at Snape's insinuations. Harry needed to study the Hogwarts bylaws before classes began, or he knew Snape would bury him in trivial infractions of the rules. How Dumbledore could be so accepting of the traitorous man's actions went beyond the pale in Harry's opinion, and—

“Diffindo!”

“Conjunctivitis!”

“Stupefy!”

“Reducto!”

Bright flashes of spell magic shot toward Harry and impacted on a flickering golden shield, which crumpled almost immediately but clearly weakened the onslaught of curses as Harry was violently thrown into the cramped area between the gargoyle and the wall. His left pocket exploded with a dull whump as he went flying through the air, little bits of rock digging into his thigh and scattering across the hall along with pieces of his clothing.

His head pounding painfully, Harry felt the onslaught of strange sensations — he intensely disliked the closed-in feeling of the cramped nook he had fallen into, and his mind was screaming at him that he was under attack. Harry watched detachedly as the Sorting Hat slowly fell in the middle of the hall, its tip twirling in slow motion.

“Get him!” One boy's voice called out.

“Get him!” Dudley shouted as Harry was trapped under the rubbish bins behind the school. Harry felt the panic of knowing he was unable to move and was about to receive a vicious beating.

“He's not getting away!” A different boy's voice called out.

“He's not getting away!” Piers Polkiss shouted back, the tall but scrawny six-year-old swinging a thick stick and smashing it across

the back of Harry's leg. The muffled crack of the stick breaking, accompanied by the wave of pain, terrified Harry.

With an inarticulate cry of rage, Harry shot to his feet, his left hand flicking down as a wand slid into his grip, his right hand reaching to his left hip and grasping the hilt of a katana that had no sheath. As he pulled the hilt out, the blade grew from nothingness into a quicksilver flash of lethal steel.

"Incendio!" One of the girls shouted with her arm extended, the fire of hate in her eyes.

Harry saw the curse from the girl fly toward his head as he dove and rolled out of the way.

"Diffindo!" The first boy tried to curse him again.

Harry could see the faces of the other children through his tears, all the boys egging each other on to kick him or hit him.

Harry regained his feet, his left hand flicking his wand to make a shimmering shield appear and deflect the Cutting Curse even as his right hand swept the katana across from right to left in a classic shokesa slice. The girl with hate in her eyes screamed in agony as she suddenly saw her arm below the elbow lying on the floor, her wand still clutched in the now useless hand. Spinning slightly, Harry put the girl between him and the other attackers as the next round of curses flew and he shoved her hard in the back.

"Reducto!" screamed one of the boys.

"Reducto!" the other girl echoed.

"Incarcerous!" roared the other boy.

Harry propelled the wandless girl forward with enough force for her to absorb all three curses. Her body wrapped up tightly in ropes, she fell under the dual Reductor curses. Harry shot to one side and made a circular stabbing motion with his wand while sharply calling out,

“Foro!”, directing the spell at the other girl. As the spell hit her, the girl stared dumbly at her stomach – it looked like someone had punched a hole all the way through her. Staring blankly at Harry, she sank to her feet, never realizing that she had collapsed on top of an old hat, which was giving off a faint blue glow.

His cries of pain were ignored as they kicked him repeatedly, until he finally crawled behind a bin, and they gave up trying to drag him out.

Harry charged toward the second boy, who immediately started to back-pedal, desperately trying to throw another Reductor curse at Harry. The first boy, clearly starting to panic, shouted, “Sectumsempra!” as he frantically moved away from Harry.

Harry had no idea what the first boy’s spell would do, so he dropped to the floor in a smooth roll, causing both of the curses to completely miss him. Harry rolled back to his feet with his katana held low, and he nonverbally Summoned the second boy. As the boy flew towards him, Harry planted the far tip of the blade on the boy’s opposite hip, and, using the boy’s momentum, Harry drew a long horizontal do slice across the bottom of his belly before sharply twisting the blade up his side, letting nature take its course.

Silently, Harry swore to himself that, one day, when he could stop bullies, he would. In the meantime, he needed to learn how to survive in order to reach that one day.

Reflexively ducking and rolling again to keep his erratic motion going, Harry shot to his feet and saw that the remaining boy was trying hard not to turn and flee, panic written across his face and in his bulging eyes. Reducto! thought Harry, at the same time the boy said it aloud. Harry’s automatic diving roll took him out of the path of his opponent’s curse, but the other boy was not as fortunate. Harry’s curse struck him squarely in the centre of his chest, and he toppled backwards, a look of utter shock on his face. All across the stone floor, tendrils of blue were tracing across the floor in seemingly random patterns, clashing horribly with the dark red blood on ground.

“Stop him!” The scream came from behind him and left Harry in a horrible place, fear clawing at his insides. He was facing the wrong way, completely exposed, unknown assailants closing on him.

“Stop him!” Wormtail shouted as Nicolas was struggling to get back to his feet from the surprise attack, Harry trapped beneath him. Lucius’ Killing Curse took the glimmer of energy, the hint of mischief, the glow of love out of the eyes of Harry’s virtual grandfather.

Harry released his bindings on his magic and concentrated hard on the wandless Area Stunning Spell, the only thing that could buy him the seconds he needed to regroup. A rolling ring of magic shot out from his body, and his skin felt like it was on fire. Harry dropped into a backroll and came up spinning to face the rest of the attackers.

Two tall boys were down on the ground, having fallen to either side of a petite girl. Raising the katana high over his head for a full skull-cleaving min attack, he dimly registered her look of both horror and extreme anger before he saw an immense wave of raw magic shoot out from her and catch him in the chest. He flew through the air once more to hit the wall with a sickening crunch. Stunned, Harry heard screams and the sound of running feet nearby, and as he felt unconsciousness take him, he wondered faintly at the meaning of it all.

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A/N:

This chapter, technically the second half of the last chapter, was a nightmare for my betas, although I’m sure they would use more vague terms. It almost became two chapters in and of itself. While still dense and full of information that may (hint hint) become critical later, it reads much better now than when they first got their greedy hands on it

About the population numbers, typical lifespan, and so forth. As most people are aware, JKR is infamously bad at dealing with all things numeric. The numbers presented here serve several purposes. One,

it lets me have some wiggle room in JKR's sandbox while dealing with her inconsistencies with reporting the numbers behind it all. I've bounded what's current, what used to be more typical in times of peace and plenty, and give an indication about life overall. Two, these also represent a stake in the ground, providing ramifications for the story development as well as helping you gain insight on what is and isn't feasible based on population sizes. For the rest, keep reading to see how this data comes back.

Terms used in fight: sho-kesa (giri), do, min. For the record, "giri" means cut – this is the "first" (sho) "priest robe" (kesa) "cut" (giri) ... it's a diagonal slash from shoulder to opposite hip (kesagiri); the shokesa was meant to take the arm off at the shoulder, or any other convenient location. The "min" (sometimes spelled "men") attack is essentially an 'I'm going to kill you and you can't stop me' charge with the sword above the head, raised to reach full extension with wrist snap to accelerate the blade through the tip of the skull, one of the hardest cuts to make. Done properly, it will split the skull into the chest. The "do" cut (pronounced more like Homer's "D'oh," probably more properly referred to as a "heragiri" (belly cut), is actually one of the basic triangular entry moves ("sankaku no irimi"), where you let the attacker cut themselves open as they rush past you, and you literally move around them in a triangular fashion, holding your sword firmly.

New spell: Foro (Latin), to piece, to bore a hole.

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to Chreechree and cwarbeck. Thanks to random folks for lending their Brit-picking data, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

## Chapter 9: Lessons in Time, ...

Wed, 10 Dec 1986

Dear Albus,

As I've told you previously, I am leaving for the winter holidays shortly. Since I'll be on the continent visiting family for the next several weeks, I assume you will have already made any alternate arrangements you feel necessary for keeping an eye on young Harry by now.

As usual, I watched Harry walk home from school today and from what I could see, he seemed fine. It was a little windy out there, but you know how December weather can be. My windows appear to be leaking again, so I'll have to get Mundungus by again to fix them. Could you ask him if you see him first?

The Dursleys never go anywhere for holiday. They spend all their time in that boring Muggle house. If you need to use my house while I'm away, you know the way in and where everything is kept – you've stopped by often enough, I daresay.

I'll be leaving tonight by Floo. I'll let you know when I'm back here in Little Whinging, which should be around 11 January.

Happy holidays to you and Minerva,

Arabella Figg

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Tue, 13 Oct 1987

It was a brisk morning, the temperature just shy of ten degrees Celsius in the coastal town of Brighton. Shortly past the full moon, Remus Lupin was a tired man, but his need to resume work was driving him on. Bills and hunger wait for no man.

Remus kept his coat pulled close about his shoulders as he slowly walked down the road, frustrated by the way his life had turned sour



in the years since his school days. During the latter months of the war, the Ministry of Magic, being what it was, had requested werewolves – well, those not working for Voldemort – to register. It was innocuous enough – register your name, occupation, and provide a magical saliva sample, so they would know if you bit anyone. There was prattle about tracking the curse through the saliva samples in the Department of Mysteries, but within a few months, the registration went from voluntary to mandatory.

The briefcase he carried was worn around the edges, his once carefully embossed and proudly shining name was now slowly starting to fade with the passing years. His clothes, while serviceable and proper, were a bit on the thin side, his face drawn and his frame wiry, a hint of grey in his hair at the temples despite his young age.

By the end of the war, werewolves were regulated Dark Creatures, and restrictions were placed on where they could live, travel to, and even with whom they could interact. After the fall of Voldemort and during the subsequent round-up of his supporters, the Ministry had even pushed limitations on what jobs werewolves could hold in the magical community.

The primary school he was walking towards was much like most junior schools in the Muggle education system of England. While not a particularly attractive building, it did have a playyard of sorts behind it. The Year 3 class he was supply teaching for, since the normal instructor was out sick, would be a refreshing change of pace. Lately, he had been called on to supply teach older students. With the imminent passing of the Education Reform Act, the determination to do well on the draft national assessment tests was driving many of the instructors for upper years somewhat loony. Schools were starting to emphasise test scores in their impending free market competition to garner the best students.

This school was on the north-western edge of the town, where the population was less dense. As was normal in his line of work, he tried to arrive at least forty-five minutes prior to the start of the day. He needed to orient himself with the building, look over the detailed lesson plan and any prospectus the regular instructor left behind, and familiarize himself with the room and materials. Teaching a group of

students who seldom left one classroom was easier and at the same time more challenging than teaching students who shifted from room to room nearly every hour. On the one hand, getting to know and joke around with the students was a much simpler task. On the other, problem children would be there throughout the day, and if the tone of respect and authority was not set up from the start, problems would develop quickly.

Being only able to work three out of every four weeks, as well as being virtually banned from the magical community, left Remus with few options to make a living. He had always leaned towards more scholarly activities, despite his occasional penchant for mischief, and supply teaching was the only job he had found that he could maintain. While the pay was less than stellar, he earned enough to get by. It also left him free to spend his evenings on his own pursuits, as marking papers and devising new lesson plans seldom took up much of his time. He was, in essence, a paid senior student who rode herd with the younger ones. Overall, he found that the pay was comparable with most temporary jobs he had held through the years, but the rewards were far better.

He also found it fortunate that the Ministry of Magic was so short-sighted when it came to Muggles. Their tendency to treat Muggles as merely intelligent animals and their lack of restrictions on his living among them fashioned his haven of opportunity. In reality, they probably failed to understand that someone might prefer to be with the Muggles. After all, why live there if you cannot use your magic around them?

After identifying himself, the administrative assistant escorted him to the room of Mr Timothy Joy, who, Remus was informed, would be out for the rest of the week. Could Remus possibly fill in for Mr Joy all week? Remus had been more than happy to accept the offer. Supply teaching at the school was an easy commute from his flat in Brixton, which was less than an hour away by the rail. The administrative assistant shook his hand and left Remus to go over the lesson plan and materials he would need for the day.

For a werewolf, Brixton was an interesting place to live, with a lot of diversity and enough hints of danger to keep you on your toes in the

southern London suburb. Tensions did not run as high since the riots a few years back, but events could still spin out of control quickly. That was partially why he enjoyed getting a call to leave the city for someplace nearby, and it happened often enough since there was a current shortage of teachers. Brighton was a little further afield than normal, but it would be a pleasant diversion for the week. Completing his preparations, Remus took some time to enjoy the sight of children running around outside his window and lost himself in thought.

Despite the fact that the Ministry's efforts had left him without hope of a job in the magical community, Remus had still retained ties with other wizards, especially with his closest friend, Sirius Black. Remus was crushed when Sirius was unmasked as the traitor responsible for the deaths of Remus' other primary ties in the wizarding world and duly sentenced and shipped to Azkaban. Suddenly bereft of his closest friends, Remus had withdrawn fully from the magical world and only made intermittent contact, primarily through Albus Dumbledore.

Remus' complete excommunication from the magical world had been precipitated by a drunken rage on 15 January 1987, coincidentally the night of the full moon. The day before, he had received the shocking information that Harry Potter, the only son of his best friend James and his wife Lily, was missing and presumed dead since no trace of him could be found. Remus had been torn apart by guilt when he found out that the boy had suffered from years of large-scale abuse at the hands of his Muggle relatives. It had been little consolation to know that the Dursleys had been arrested and imprisoned for their crimes over a month prior to Harry's disappearance. Remus felt that he had personally betrayed the memory of James, and especially that of Lily, the only woman with whom he ever felt genuinely comfortable. He had loved Lily like the sister he was denied when his family could no longer accept his condition.

Harry Potter. Harry James Potter. An innocent, happy boy, almost murdered, rescued, abused, and finally, lost. The Muggles had a freak accident, and the records of what happened to Harry were nowhere to be found, lost in a fire. The only person who knew where Harry went was dead. And no magical creature, neither owl nor phoenix, could find him. Scrying attempts only resulted in mist-filled

and cloudy crystal balls. It was as if Harry had never existed, which meant only one thing – the child Remus had secretly wished he had been allowed to raise, the child the Ministry prevented him from even seeing, was dead.

All the bottled up fury at the way life had treated him exploded out of Remus at the loss of Harry James Potter.

Drunk out of his mind on Firewhisky and without the benefit of Wolfsbane Potion, Remus had sought out Dumbledore in Hogsmeade that Sunday evening, raging at the man's negligence and lack of compassion. The confrontation between the half-crazed werewolf and the most powerful wizard alive was nothing short of fantastic, the outcome of which was that Remus had been cast out, and the Hog's Head pub had needed to be rebuilt, using considerable magic, almost from the ground up. As for Dumbledore himself, the effort had left him limping for the next couple of days, and there was an impressive scar across his back for the rest of his life.

In retrospect, Remus was glad that Albus had not only tossed him from the pub, but that the fight had also drained his strength before his transformation. It left him to wander the Forbidden Forest freely, howling his misery at the sky and anything unfortunate enough to cross his path. When Monday morning rolled around, Remus had clearly remembered Albus' warning from the prior evening to not return. Thus, Remus collected his few remaining possessions in the magical world and struck out for Muggle London, determined to never return to the people who had taken away everything and everyone he ever valued or loved. It would be hard, but he would find a way to make life work for him again. Somehow. Somewhere. Firewhisky could dull the pain for a short period of time but never erase the loss.

Shaking himself from his reverie, Remus settled down and waited for the students to arrive and seat themselves, keeping one eye on the clock. Younger students of the first primary schools had seldom yet developed the hardened attitude towards replacement teachers that older students seemed uniformly endowed with. With these younger classes, Remus would actually be able to enjoy teaching again, instead of being a glorified minder trying to keep the students under some modicum of control.

As the bell rang to signify the start of the school day, Remus stood up and cleared his throat briefly to garner everyone's attention. "Good morning, everyone. Your usual lecturer, Mr Joy, is out – apparently for the rest of the week, due to an illness. His doctor has placed him on bedrest. I will be filling in for him for the remainder of this week. My name is Remus Lupin."

Glancing around the classroom, he saw the usual mixture of students paying attention, students not quite awake, and students roughhousing a bit.

"Mr Joy left me detailed lesson plans and agendas, and yes, your reports are still due tomorrow. No extensions will be allowed." Chuckling at the groan that ran through the room, Remus was certain that at least one or two students had yet to start the project which had been apparently assigned weeks ago. "Now, let me take the roll and try to learn who you all are before we start off with the mathematics quiz I've been asked to administer."

When another groan rose from the students, Remus had to roll his eyes. "That was a hint, by the way. For those of you who have suddenly discovered that they have forgotten to do something important like homework or revision, the time I spend taking the roll should be enough for you to brush up on anything you might feel needs your attention."

Pulling out the enrolment sheet, Remus began reading off the names and making a tick next to those students present. "Ansley, Mark David?" He continued down the list, not paying too much attention to what the students were doing as long as they were quiet. He called out names as well as he could. The immigrant influx always made pronouncing some names rather difficult. He was just over half-way down the list, when –

"Potter, Harry James?" It was right after he read the name that he heard bells ringing in the back of his head. He jerked his eyes up to see a pale young boy, with messy black hair and green eyes that seemed too bright, raise his hand. Remus felt his throat go dry and

his heart race. This boy must be the child of Lily and James. Completely unaware that his face had become deathly pale, Remus stared at Harry long enough to make the boy shift uncomfortably in his seat.

Realising that the entire class was now also looking curiously at the two of them, Remus shook his head to regain his composure. He glanced at Harry. "I apologize, Mr Potter, you remind me of someone I once knew." His voice was nearly normal. Nearly. Looking back to the enrolment sheet, Remus kept his eyes averted from Harry as much as he could.

By the time the lunch hour had arrived, Remus was mentally and emotionally exhausted. He felt as if he was making Herculean efforts to avoid looking at Harry beyond what was strictly required, and clearly Harry was picking up on his discomfort. He seemed nervous, on edge, and twitched whenever Remus came near him. Deprived of his werewolf senses when not transformed, Remus felt a brief moment of regret that he could not simply sniff the air to determine Harry's mood.

Dismissing the students for lunch, he watched them file out before calling to Harry, who was in the middle of the pack. "Mr Potter, a word with you, if you please?" He tried to keep his voice calm, although his heart was beginning to race again.

Harry slowly shuffled to stand in front of the teacher's desk, his gaze trained on the table rather than at Remus.

Coughing momentarily to get his throat working again, Remus thought the best approach would be to apologize. Then he could find out if this really was the Harry James Potter he thought it must be. "Harry, I'm sorry for making you uncomfortable earlier. I would like to explain, if I may? It might be a little awkward." Remus was finding it difficult to control his voice, his fear and excitement warring with each other for dominance.

Harry risked a brief glance at Remus before nodding slightly.

“Harry, many years ago I was close friends with two people who share your name. James Potter and Lily Potter. Unfortunately, they died nearly eight years ago.” Seeing no reaction from Harry, Remus began to doubt that this was the child of James and Lily, but he needed to be certain.

“They had a son, Harry Potter, whom I had thought was lost forever. When I read your name and saw how much you look like James, it shocked me. I suppose you wouldn’t know whom I’m talking about, would you?” Remus tried for a patient tone, but the hint of a squeak kept creeping into his voice.

Harry shook his head. “I never knew my parents, sir. They died when I was a baby. I live with my foster carers now.”

Remus felt his hopes die quietly. “So you’ve been with your foster carers all along then? I’m sorry, Harry, if this has upset you. I guess you’re not the Harry I was thinking of.”

Harry stood there for a moment longer before shaking his head again. “No, sir.” His voice was very quiet. “I lived with my Aunt Petunia until last winter.” His gaze still averted, Harry had no chance to notice the shock on Remus’ face.

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Sun, 3 Sep 1995, 21:47

The first conscious thought Harry had upon waking was that whoever was shaking his shoulder was asking for a world of pain to be delivered to them by express post as soon as he could find a box big enough. He felt as if several small trolls were inside his body, each smashing away with a ball-pin hammer at a particularly sensitive location or directly in his brain.

The second conscious thought Harry had upon waking was that despite the pain and the irritating shaking, he was wearing perhaps the singularly most unpleasant outfit he had ever encountered. It felt as if it was made from proverbial camel hair, and he realised that he

itched in ways that would undoubtedly haunt his wildest nightmares in the future.

The third conscious thought Harry had upon waking was that if he failed to open his eyes and threaten bodily harm upon whoever was shaking him, he might not survive to harm them later. The pain they were inducing with their shaking was making him re-evaluate just how small the trolls and their hammers were.

“What?” he croaked without opening his eyes, certain that actually seeing any light would only make the throbbing in his head worse, if that were possible.

“Mr Potter,” a brusque female voice was saying far too loudly for comfort, “you must take this potion. It will reduce the pain so we can try to treat you.”

Somehow the idea of being treated seemed wholly inappropriate. Buried or cremated seemed more palatable options at the moment. Vaguely curious as to what his cause of death would actually be, he gathered his strength to find out a little more. “S’rong with me?”

With a huff, the woman gave up shaking him, much to Harry’s immense relief. “‘What isn’t?’ would be the better question. You’ve got more broken bones and burns and holes about you than one of Hagrid’s pets’ toys. You’re in for an unpleasant evening, I believe. Will you drink this now?”

Deciding that whatever was being offered was less likely to induce more pain than what he was already enjoying, he just opened his mouth and let her pour the concoction down. Fighting the urge to gag and spit up what liquefied dragon dung must taste like, Harry tried to breathe deeply only to find his entire chest objected to that idea. With a groan escaping his lips, Harry resigned himself to what had already qualified as an unpleasant evening.

“We’ll just give that a moment to take the edge off the pain, Mr Potter,” the entirely too chipper voice continued to talk at him. Harry could hear things moving around, but it really just meant that she was



manipulating body parts, and none too gently, much to his dismay. Broken bones? That was obvious from the pain levels. Burns? Not again. Holes? Where had the holes come from? And for that matter, why exactly was he in this place? There was something on the edge, just out of reach, something important...

“Feeling better?” The owner of the voice was so close to his ear that it startled him. His left arm reflexively shot out to knock the person away, or rather, his left arm lifted about four inches off the bed before it felt like someone had rammed a white-hot iron poker into his shoulder. Grunting from the pain, Harry tried to relax as his muscles tensed involuntarily in an effort to try preventing any additional movement.

“Well, you must be since you’re trying to move. Do try to hold still, Mr Potter.”

Harry was beginning to truly hate that voice, certain that as soon as he was able, he would make sure that the owner of the voice would learn to be quiet, dignified, and to use very few words. “R’am I?” His voice seemed to be working, if a bit on the harsh side, but the effort of making himself heard more clearly set his lungs on fire.

“St Mungo’s, Mr Potter. I’m Healer Andrews.” Whatever the chipper voice was doing, the sounds of things coming closer to his bed let him know his rest time was almost over. “You came in with eight other bodies from some battle. The others are being looked over presently. Headmaster Dumbledore and your school nurse came along with a few others, and the bodies of course. I haven’t seen them since I finished school, oh, three years ago now. This is a right mess, I’ll tell you, nine bodies, blood everywhere...”

“Battle?” Harry tried to ask quietly.

The hand was back on his shoulder, shaking him slightly. “Open your eyes, Mr Potter. I need to check you.” Resigned to the situation, Harry opened his eyes and felt unpleasant sensations run through him, his stomach roiling from the overwhelming sensory inputs. A bright light was flashed into each of Harry’s eyes. The fuzzy figure

that owned the voice muttered quietly to herself. "Right, that's definite head trauma, both clavicles compound fractured, most ribs hairline fractured, both legs compound, and right arm compound..." She switched to waving her wand in complex motions while slowly moving around his bed. "Mmmm, punctures across left hip and thigh, upper back, pierced cavity there... first-degree over face, chest, and legs... second-degree over hands and arms..."

Harry felt his consciousness wavering as she rattled off hints about the extent of his injuries. He was still mildly confused as to why he had been in a fight, let alone a battle.

"Well, then, Mr Potter... we'll have you right as rain shortly, but I'm afraid you'll have to stay until the early morning hours so that the Skele-Grow can finish its job. I've got a set of potions and salves you'll need, so let me get started."

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Mon, 4 Sep 1995, 00:12

Harry found it impossible to sleep or think much, as the Skele-Grow was slowly driving him insane. His admittedly attractive Healer had finally given up on getting anything other than a sour demeanour from him, and she had finally left him alone. That left him with ample uninterrupted time to sit in an uncomfortable position and watch the silent picture of a moonlit landscape hanging opposite his bed.

Most of the pain was gone, although the tingling and shifting sensations along with occasional flashes of sharp pain were signs that his bones were still repairing themselves. While not his absolutely least favourite medical potion, Skele-Grow was easily somewhere in the top five.

The door to his private room swung open, admitting Dumbledore and Auror Shacklebolt. While the tall Auror was impassive as always, Dumbledore's shadowed eyes and grave expression gave Harry a moment's pause. The Headmaster placed Floppy on the nightstand, along with Harry's wand, recovered from the battle. Floppy looked a little worse for the wear.

Dumbledore conjured a plush chair to sit on and coolly regarded Harry for a long minute. "Mr Potter, we find ourselves in a difficult situation. I have three dead students, and one more not expected to survive the night. I have three more students who have various levels of injury but who will live. I have a staff member who has lost his left hand, and it cannot be restored. I need to know what happened."

Harry gave a weak half smile. "As do I, Headmaster."

Albus stared at Harry, dumbfounded. "Are you saying you have no recollection of events?"

Harry would have shrugged, but the limits of his pain threshold had long since been exceeded. "Oh, I remember talking in your office about my schedule, maybe even something about tutoring. The next thing I can recall is feeling like I tried to drink a goblin under the table and stupidly won the contest. Did they not tell you what my injuries were?"

Albus gave a brief nod. "They did mention you had sustained a head injury, but they were unclear as to what the extent of the injury might entail." He paused to watch as Harry slowly and painfully straightened his leg. "Did you have your sensory monitor on, Harry?"

Harry smiled faintly. "It would be in my clothes, wherever they are, and yes, it was on."

"Excellent!" said Dumbledore as he rose and moved to the wardrobe in the corner. "Usually, Harry, they place your possessions in here if you arrive unable to take care of yourself." Dumbledore retrieved a set of clothes and placed them at the foot of the bed.

Harry recognized all the clothing as his, although he was somewhat shocked to see the dull stain marks all over the robes. "You're looking for a small pouch that would have been around my neck under the clothes, sir. It should be a dark green in colour." Dumbledore rifled through the small pile, and Harry was pleased when the Headmaster pulled the pouch out and set it aside, returning the clothes to the wardrobe.

Dumbledore picked up the pouch and loosened the drawstrings, upending the bag into his palm. However, instead of a shiny silver orb, a collection of dull grey fragments that had once made up a sensory monitor tinkled gently onto the old wizard's hand. Studying the fragments closely, Dumbledore flicked his wand, quietly saying, "Reparo!"

Harry sighed, drawing the attention of both the Headmaster and the Auror. "They can't be repaired. They are designed to be irrevocably destroyed once broken. The intent was that before a monitor could be lost, the holder could smash it, and no one would find out what had been on it, since it takes too long to just erase it in an emergency."

Shacklebolt looked at Harry with clear surprise on his face. "How do you know this? And why don't I?" Again, Harry was surprised at the moderate and slightly melodic voice of the large man. He would almost swear that Kingsley was from someplace other than the British Isles.

"I know the inventors."

Dumbledore placed the fragments on the table before looking back at Harry. "Would you let me past your shields, Harry, so that I might try to locate the memories we need to see? And, perhaps, to see how we might repair the damage you sustained?"

Harry contemplated the ceiling for several minutes before finally shaking his head. "I'm sorry, but no. There are too many things I want kept private that you would easily and most certainly come across."

Shacklebolt stirred slightly. "Mr Potter, we need to know what happened. The only ones able to tell us anything don't know how the battle started, and they claim that they only arrived at the very end of it. We have several devastated families out there, and this incident will not be swept under any rug. There isn't even a rug large enough for this mess." His gaze was neutral, but the tone of the Auror's voice suggested that Harry get over himself and let Dumbledore do what he wanted.

Floppy suddenly sat up on the nightstand. "I can help, I believe," the Hat announced.

Shacklebolt was clearly shocked that the Hat was talking outside of a Sorting, whereas Harry and Dumbledore just looked curious. Noticing the Auror's obviously perplexed stare, Dumbledore waved his hand at Harry and Floppy. "The two of them like to chat with each other."

Harry smirked briefly at the Auror before looking back at the Hat. "How now, Floppy?"

If anything, Shacklebolt's surprised expression became complete when he heard the Hat's name. Floppy, however, ignored the Auror. "Recall, Mr Potter, what I said about my purpose for existing."

Harry could feel the light in his brain. "I do. You mean you can take an active hand in things as well?"

Floppy almost sounded smug. "It's not much good to just listen, now is it, Mr Potter?"

Harry was thoughtful for a moment, counting ceiling tiles before he found the flaw in the situation. "Err, Floppy, I thought you couldn't see into my head because of my shields?"

"I can't, Mr Potter. But you now know enough to trust me with your confidences, do you not?" Dumbledore himself seemed quite surprised by this comment.

Harry continued to study the ceiling. "Errr, no offense, Floppy, but I'm not real keen on you looking around in my head either."

Floppy was unperturbed. "Is there anyone that you do trust, Mr Potter?" The Hat could not have made it plainer that it expected a resounding 'no' in response.

"Of course. Unfortunately, he can't come here, and I doubt I'd be allowed to go someplace private considering the circumstances."

Shacklebolt nodded while observing, "Correct."

"Well, Mr Potter," Floppy continued patiently, "shall it be the Headmaster or I that takes a look inside that head of yours? Think about what I've already been through."

Harry had to grudgingly admit that Floppy had a point. "Alright, then, Floppy." Harry politely looked at the Headmaster and the Auror. "If you would both excuse us..." The two men got up to leave the room.

"Oh, and Headmaster, if you would be so kind as to place Floppy on my head and my wand in my hand?" Dumbledore did so and followed Shacklebolt into the corridor.

Harry paused to lock the door and place Imperturbable and Perimeter Charms throughout the room. Relaxing his mind, Harry slowly took his Occlumency shields all the way down to the basic Level One shields he had learned years before.

Floppy was silent for almost a minute before exclaiming, "My word!"

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Mon, 4 Sep 1995, 01:58

After restoring his Level Five shields, Harry released all the protections on the room before calling out for the Headmaster to return. Still sitting awkwardly, Harry was relieved that he had almost normal use of his arms again, and breathing was much easier. His left leg was all that seemed to still be healing, and now that his memories were accessible again, Harry very much wanted out of the hospital and out of the clothes he was currently wearing. He desperately needed to find the right people and then talk to them.

Dumbledore and Shacklebolt came back almost immediately when he unlocked the door, Dumbledore returning to his chair and the Auror to his leaning spot on the wall. Dumbledore looked carefully at Harry before asking the question that was written plainly on his face. "And was Floppy able to return your memories?"

Harry nodded, keeping his face as expressionless as he could manage. "I understand that he's not exactly returning them, more like finding them, and then showing me how to access them again. I know what happened, and I know I was ambushed and defended myself."

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I expected as much, Harry, but I still must see the evidence. Shacklebolt procured a judicial Pensieve while you were working with Floppy. Do you know how these work?"

Harry shook his head. "I've never used one, sir, and I've never been taught how to take advantage of their extra features."

Dumbledore waved his hand as though the matter were of no consequence. "Never mind, Harry. All that is relevant for now is that, while any memory submitted by this manner cannot be used as the only evidence of a crime, it can be used to build a chain of evidence and corroborate other events. The most crucial detail is that no tampered memory will be accepted by the Pensieve. Do you understand?"

Harry shrugged. "Of course." Harry knew that to a skilled practitioner, memories could be sliced and diced to present an alternate reality from what truly occurred, while still being one hundred-percent valid.

"Very well, please transfer a copy of your memory into it, and let us observe what happened." Dumbledore waited while Harry placed a copy of the memory into the Pensieve that Shacklebolt had set on the bed. When he finished, Harry swirled the memory briefly before tapping the bowl, causing the scene to appear above the bowl in a ghostly three dimensional view. The memory picked up with Harry leaving the Headmaster's office and ended when he lost consciousness. Harry noticed that the wave of magic he saw before being thrown back was not visible in the memory, nor was his wandless Stunner.

Dumbledore and Shacklebolt shared a frown and a look before replaying the memory. Harry ignored them while they both physically entered the Pensieve, this time to scrutinize events in more detail. He

was having a hard time sitting still while thinking about the entire battle, particularly the way it had ended.

As Dumbledore and Shacklebolt came back from their inspection of the events, Dumbledore began pacing while Shacklebolt sat down heavily in the chair that Dumbledore was no longer using. The Auror was looking at Harry with an indecipherable expression.

“I have questions, Mr Potter,” Dumbledore began the discussion. “What was that shield at the very beginning?”

Harry smirked slightly. “An experiment, sir. While less than successful, it did save my life.”

Shacklebolt leaned forward. “That was no basic shield, Mr Potter.”

Harry raised his eyebrows in response. “No, it wasn’t. But it also wasn’t Dark magic, so... does it really matter what it was?”

Shacklebolt was clearly ready to grill Harry when Dumbledore spoke up, cutting the Auror off before he could start. “No, of course not. I rather suspect I can guess what that was, particularly with what happened to your clothing during that first assault.” Harry knew Dumbledore understood what it was and, most likely, the implications of what Harry was trying to do with it.

Shacklebolt, however, seemed disappointed. “But if it saved his life, couldn’t Aurors use it as well? Even if it wasn’t enough to stop the onslaught, it could increase the chances of surviving an attack.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “I’m afraid not, Kingsley. It’s of very limited use, unless Harry can find some way to overcome the problems in the design.” Shacklebolt slumped in the chair, letting it tilt back against the wall, rubbing his eyes in frustration the whole time. Dumbledore, however, leaned over the foot of the bed, watching Harry intently. “What happened at the very end, Harry? You were about to charge, when you were knocked aside like an annoying insect.”



Harry frowned in turn. "No idea. I believe she did it, although I'm not entirely certain, nor can I explain how, but I don't know what it was. I've never seen or felt anything like that. And frankly, I never want to again." The Pensieve memory was always an echo of events, and anything magical like a spell being cast was only clear if the concentration of magic was sufficiently high. Otherwise, everything in a memory would glow, making it impossible to discern anything.

Their conversation was interrupted as Severus Snape strode into the room, looking for the Headmaster. Harry tensed, his wand gripped tightly. "Headmaster," Severus said, as he glared at Harry, "the Zabini boy has died from his wounds. His family is... displeased." Harry thought that Snape almost seemed delighted that the Zabini boy, whichever one that was, was dead.

Dumbledore looked back at Harry. "Harry, your memory matches the spells we observed coming from the wands of everyone involved in the battle. While not admissible by itself, if you combine it with our study of the wands, it is clear you acted in self-defence. It would be much better if your monitor had survived the fighting, but there is nothing we can do about that now."

Harry, however, kept his eyes on Snape. "Tell me, Snape, how is it that I was ambushed right after you showed up again?"

Snape sneered at Harry. "Learn some manners, Potter. I have no idea why you were attacked at that time. Would you like to use some Veritaserum for me to prove it?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Do I look like a fool? Veritaserum doesn't work on an Occlumens, and you know that. Just as I know that you're a skilled Occlumens."

Snape smirked unpleasantly. "An Unbreakable Vow, then? One that declares that I lack knowledge of any ambush planned for you outside the Headmaster's office by these four students? Or were those three Gryffindors involved as well? I can swear to not knowing anything about all seven of them planning to attack you, individually or collectively, if you like." The acidic tone was taunting Harry to demand just such an oath, which was surprising.

Dumbledore heaved a great sigh and stood up to place a restraining hand on Snape. "Enough. We have sufficient problems to deal with at the moment. While Severus and I still need to have a long talk about other events, I have questioned him about tonight most carefully, Harry. I am certain he has no knowledge of the episode in question."

Harry quirked an eyebrow but kept his guard on high while Snape was in the room. The man's attitude and calmness just seemed off. Dumbledore turned back to Severus and motioned for him to leave the room. "Thank you, Severus, we will be out momentarily."

After Snape left, Harry held up a hand and again cast Imperturbable and Perimeter Charms around the room. Almost instantly the door began hooting at him. Harry looked at the Headmaster while the Headmaster frowned. "He can't hear us, but he's trying to. As I have said previously, you may trust him. I do not." Cancelling the annoying Perimeter Charms, Harry left the Imperturbable ones in place.

Dumbledore sighed again and wearily sank back into the plush chair. "I will be talking to Severus as soon as I can, Harry. In case you hadn't noticed, your arrival has been shaking things up rather dramatically with little time for resolution before the next upheaval occurs."

"Fudge is here because of the identity of the students who attacked you, Harry. I doubt if you are aware of how influential the families of those students are. Blaise Zabini, Adrian Pucey, Pansy Parkinson – all of them came from powerful pure-blood families, and each one of them was an only child. Miss Parkinson was also the fiancée of Draco Malfoy. The fourth student, Daphne Greengrass, was also from a long line of pure-bloods, although she was different from the others in that she had several siblings. I daresay you already knew the Weasleys involved. Ironically enough, they are yet another pure-blood family."

Pulling off his glasses, Dumbledore carefully cleaned them on the hem of his robes. "If you include the Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle families, Harry... you have, in less than a week, set most of the pure-

blood supremacist families against you. This means that Fudge is also against you, since they are his largest campaign 'contributors'."

Returning his glasses to his face, Dumbledore looked at Shackbolt for a second before turning back to Harry. "Alastor Moody has been recalled to the Ministry for active duty, Harry. Further, Fudge has passed a law that allows him to substitute a professor when there is an opening I have not filled. He is placing someone loyal to him as the new DADA professor, Madame Umbridge. I expect you two shall get along... spectacularly."

Shackbolt leaned in again to watch Harry. "You wouldn't happen to know why Filch lost his hand when he picked up your sword, would you, Mr Potter?"

Harry sighed. "You were supposed to warn everyone, Headmaster. Never play with another man's tools without permission."

Dumbledore appeared less than pleased by Harry's callous statement. Rising to his feet, he handed the judicial Pensieve back to Shackbolt before turning one last time to look to Harry. "Is there anything you wish to discuss with me before we meet later?"

Harry nodded his head quickly. "How are the Weasleys?"

Dumbledore frowned. "The boys are fine, just stunned and a little shaken by events. Young Ginevra, however, has some serious injuries and is another patient here. I have been told, however, that she should be well enough to return in time for classes tomorrow, but she is still under careful observation. As for you, your injuries were of a different sort."

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment. "May I see them?"

Dumbledore slowly shook his head. "Harry, I don't think that would be a good idea. Her entire family is in there with her. They are very concerned. Enough rumours have gone around that I had to literally Stun her mother before she could come down here and, well, let's just say she wanted to 'talk' to you. Vociferously. Let the truth of the

events come out first. Otherwise I fear you may become a permanent resident here. Just give them some time, Harry.”

Harry gave the Headmaster a half-hearted smile as the two men left his room.

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Mon, 4 Sep 1995, 07:34

Striding into the Great Hall for breakfast, Harry became acutely aware of the sudden wave of silence that washed over the assembled students and staff. Everyone was cautiously watching him, many with fear in their eyes. After all, he had killed four Slytherin students and tried to kill three Gryffindors.

As Harry sat down at the end of the Gryffindor table, all the students near him began slowly sliding down the table to get as far away as possible. Their reactions reminded him of prey slowly moving away from an unexpected predator before bolting in sudden flight.

Harry carefully studied the various clusters of students, noting the rapid whispers and nearly constant fearful glances cast his way. With no apparent source for the rumours that must have spread, Harry ignored the sudden influx of owls with the morning post and looked at the staff to gauge their reactions. Snape sat stiffly at the head table, watching Harry with a sneer, his black eyes shining in triumph.

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A/N:

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to cwarbeck and Chreechree. Thanks to random people for their aid with Brit-picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

One character name in this chapter was changed from prior versions. I have also changed the versions at other sites. It's not a plot change, it was a cameo slot that I used without permission. In fairness, I've struck it from the chapter since I haven't received permission (yet) to use it.

The thing with the sword and Filch was not, despite what you may think, a spin off of the Blade stories (or insert anime/book/movie of choice here). Consider the term "cursed weapon" used throughout history. They have been noted for maiming or killing non-owners that attempt to wield them. This may even be a hint.

You might be interested to find out about the Educational Reform Act of 1988 in England. There are some parallels in intent to the No Child Left Behind legislation that "Dubya" pushed through in the States for a PR-driven points game. While the idea has always been good, the implementation has always been less than stellar, regardless of where you are.

## Chapter 10: ... Control, ...

Mon, 4 Sep, 7:36

Snape sat at the Head Table, not even thirty feet from where Harry was sitting at the end of the Gryffindor table. Harry's impromptu glaring contest with the man was brought to a screeching halt when a school owl landed in the middle of his empty plate. It nipped at his ear to get his attention.

Surprised to be receiving any post by this method, Harry looked at the owl and saw a note attached to its leg. Harry scratched the owl's neck as he retrieved the note, which had his name on it. It fluttered off, presumably heading back to the Owlery.

Unfolding the parchment, Harry read the terse message. We're waiting for you in the same place. – Fred and George Preferring to see the twins rather than sit in the silent fishbowl of fear that was the Great Hall, Harry grabbed his bag and a couple of rolls off the table. He noticed many students bent over the morning post, casting furtive glances at him. Shrugging off the stares as a consequence of the already rampant rumours, Harry stood up and turned back to head out of the hall.

As he stood up, however, he came face to face with Professor McGonagall, who was staring at him with an indecipherable expression. Without saying a word, she thrust his schedule at him. As soon as his fingers touched it, she released her grip and stalked off to the rest of the students in her house, the stack of schedules clutched in her pale fingers.

Resigned to animosity from the entire school, Harry again tried to head for the exit yet was stopped before he could take more than two strides. Without Harry's noticing, Snape had smoothly descended from the Head Table and now blocked his path.

"Potter," he sneered, his eyes still glinting in a way that profoundly irritated Harry. "For your collection of clippings. I'm positive you enjoy collecting articles about your conquests." The strange statement was accompanied by Snape thrusting a rolled up copy of the morning

paper at him. With a further sneer, Snape returned to his seat, his cloak billowing behind him.

Deciding he would figure out the man's game later, Harry left to find the twin pranksters and eat his rolls in peace.

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Mon, 4 Sep, 7:41

George was waiting for him outside the entrance to the collapsed secret passageway. He was pacing back and forth, his face pale, any trace of humour gone. Spotting Harry, he jerked his head at the slightly open portrait door. Harry followed George down into the little area and closed the door behind him.

At the bottom of the stairs, Fred was sitting in one of three straight wooden chairs, with a small table separating them. George slumped onto one chair while Fred waved Harry to sit down. Fred looked just as pale and serious as his twin.

Harry put his bag under the seat and dropped the paper he was carrying onto the table. It partially unfurled, revealing a bit of a headline that suddenly grabbed his attention. Straightening out the paper, Harry quickly read the top-fold story, ignoring the series of pictures next to it of the four students he had killed.

Boy Who Lived Kills Four

Tries to kill more!

by Rita Skeeter

Late yesterday evening, Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived, attacked at least seven students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry with a sword. Four unarmed students (all of them from Slytherin House) were mercilessly killed. Three more students were grievously wounded when they stumbled across the blood bath Potter made in butchering the Slytherin students. Enraged at being discovered, Potter then tried to eliminate the witnesses, all

Gryffindors, only to be caught off guard by the fast thinking of one would-be victim.

Potter, who mysteriously disappeared at the age of six, refused to attend Hogwarts when invited for his first-year studies. Rumours quickly suggested that he was receiving training in the Dark Arts from former Death Eaters, as well as Dark creatures such as vampires, werewolves, and malcontent goblins. He refused to attend each time an offer was extended, until this summer, when he suddenly agreed for unknown reasons. Potter's unexpected reappearance has raised many questions, not only as to where he has been but also to what he has been learning.

While it has never been proven, additional evidence suggesting Potter is indeed Dark came to light after the fight yesterday eve. While trying to clean up the pools of blood and body parts Potter left behind, the hard-working and generous Argus Filch, Caretaker of Hogwarts, also became a victim of Potter's Dark powers when he picked up one of Potter's weapons. The sword, clearly a Dark artefact, failed to take the Filch's life, but did successfully remove his left hand through some form of curse. Clearly, Potter is using Dark Arts if he is able to handle cursed objects with impunity.

Was Potter trying to eliminate any opposition in his bid to take control of the school? Were the Slytherin students, who were waiting outside the Headmaster's office to talk with him, trying to report him for crimes or to relay their suspicions? Or is Potter merely out to eliminate all of the pure-blood families?

Recall that Potter also viciously attacked three other Slytherin students on the train ride to school. Two of those students have since been exonerated. Last night's events, coupled with Potter's false accusations against Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, raise deep questions about the supposed charges against the honourable Draco Malfoy. The Malfoy family has a long history of generous donations to charities and civic involvement in government.

Rumours also claim that Potter is trying to oust the talented Severus Snape, Potions Master and Lecturer at Hogwarts, who has tried to catch Potter in his acts of aggression. Professor Snape, also Head of



Slytherin House, was unavailable for comment prior to publication, hard-pressed to console the families, devastated by Potter's killing spree, that had gathered at St Mungo's in their grief and loss.

Our hearts must go out to the noble and distinguished families who have lost their children, victimized by the last Potter. Those involved in the battle were (continued, page 2.)

In disgust, Harry threw the paper away. George caught it and scanned the article, raising one eyebrow as he did so.

Realizing that clearly Snape knew or at least was involved with more than he was revealing, Harry could feel his rage building. Would Dumbledore still find Snape free of doubt over this incident, given his actions this morning? Tonight he would go back to pushing on the old man to find out. Glaring at the four pictures of innocent, happy looking children smiling and waving at the camera, Harry realized that he had been quite neatly set up.

It had been a calculated risk on the part of his enemies: the four students had likely been ordered to attack him – kill him if possible. If they had been successful in killing him, the charges against the other Slytherin students would have been dropped. If, however, Harry somehow managed to survive but injure his assailants, then his actions would have been used against him to eliminate the threat that he posed.

The fact that Harry had executed the Slytherins had probably taken his opponents by surprise, but knowing Lucius Malfoy and his cronies, they would – and had already done so, judging from the article in the Daily Prophet – turn these unexpected events to their advantage.

That Lucius sacrificed the children of other families in the gamble would never cross the man's mind.

Harry would now find himself under the magical equivalent of the spotlight. Any movement he made, any spell he cast, any conversation he had would be carefully replayed and scrutinized. Even the most outlandish accusations trying to connect his actions with the Dark Arts would become justifiable.

Harry had to hand it to the senior Malfoy. The man had orchestrated events masterfully in his attempt to redeem Draco. If sufficient doubt could be cast on Harry's character, Draco would be able to skate by with self-defence claims. Especially if Lucius could point out that he had known and warned Draco beforehand that Harry might be Dark.

In fact, Harry could see the defence clearly now. They would claim that Draco had sought Harry out to ascertain the truth behind Lucius' fears, thinking himself safe to interact with impunity in a public place. Somehow, Harry knew that Draco's own comments would be played off as some kind of test of Harry.

Nothing was adding up correctly. The question was how did Snape and Fudge play into this? And was Dumbledore really blindly trusting Snape, or was he somehow involved too?

How did the Slytherin students get their instructions? How was Lucius passing along his plans? Where did Voldemort enter the equation? There was more than he could understand involved here.

George cleared his throat to get Harry's attention off the paper. Fred, who made a show of just finishing his reading of the article, dropped the paper back on the table.

The twins involuntarily flinched when Harry stared hard at them, unconsciously with a look which clearly conveyed pain to anyone who crossed him, before Harry realized he was out of line and carefully rearranged his face into a neutral expression.

George cleared his throat again, suddenly nervous in the setting. "Er, Harry, Dumbledore told us before we got here that you asked to see us last night." Glancing quickly at Fred, George tried and failed to look Harry in the eye. "What did you want?"

Harry took a few deep breaths, blowing them out slowly, trying to regain his centre. His rage was boiling over, and he needed to keep it in check until he could safely vent it during training. Shaking himself mentally and physically, he glanced at his watch and realized he had little time to say anything at all.

“Well,” Harry looked at Fred and George, wanting to meet both their eyes. “First, I wanted to apologize. I was acting on instinct, and I shouldn’t have been.”

Harry waited a moment, but neither twin was reacting. “Second, I wanted to find out if you were okay. Dumbledore,” the name came out colder than he intended, “said you two were alright, but that Ginny was hurt. Is she okay?” Harry was trying to be calm and sincere since he truly was concerned, but his irritation and frustration were making his voice harsher than he desired.

Fred stirred a bit before slowly nodding his head. “The Healers released her about an hour ago. They say she’s fine now, at least physically. We all came back together.”

Harry nodded his head slowly. “I’m glad,” he offered simply. “I’m sorry for what I did do, and almost did, to all three of you.”

George shifted before looking back at Harry. “What about the other four?”

Harry stared him in the eye. “Not in the least.”

Fred slowly stretched out a finger and tapped the paper on the table. “We know not to believe everything we read, Harry, but this is the only account we’ve heard about it. You understand?”

George leaned towards Harry, a rather slight frown on his face. “Remember that ‘please do not make things worse’ thing we talked about, Harry?”

Harry sighed, realizing the twins were in a full protection mode of some kind. “Look, I don’t have time to give you a blow-by-blow right now. It was self-defence. I’ll give you any oath you want on it. You’re going to have to believe what you want to believe until I can show you what happened.” Fred and George shared a frown.

Harry glanced at his watch again before standing. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry you all were involved. Dumbledore and Auror Shackbolt

both agreed it was self-defence. I've got to get to my first class, so I'll show you the memory later, right?"

There was a long drawn out moment of silence before Harry finished. "You two need to realize I won't always be able to tell you or show you what's going on. At some point, you're going to have to take it on faith that I'm not what that article portrays me as."

Harry left the twins in their unhappy silence as he went to meet Neville Longbottom outside Greenhouse Number Two, almost certain that any change in his relations with the twins would be centred on how events affected their sister. There was nothing he could do about it now – what was done was done. Maybe when they talked later, things would get better.

Resigned to a prolonged stay in the proverbial house of frustration and condemnation, Harry was already tired as he departed the castle, ignoring the wide berth students gave him as he passed through the halls.

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Mon, 4 Sep, 8:00

Neville Longbottom was waiting outside the greenhouse as Harry approached. The slightly pudgy boy was looking fairly anxious, and Harry was having a hard time deciding if Neville was relieved or disappointed that Harry actually showed up. Opening the door to the greenhouse, Neville walked inside, keeping a good bit of distance between the two of them. As Neville tried to put on his dragon hide gloves with shaking hands, Harry finally opted for directness.

"Something on your mind, Neville?" The brown-haired boy looked up at Harry with a squeak, dropping both his gloves on the ground.

"N-no," he said quietly, squatting down to grab his gloves.

“Come off it, Neville. It’s clear you expect me to do something. Is it that article in the paper?” Harry asked, trying to find a tone of patience but merely coming across as frustrated.

Neville stood back up while keeping his eyes on his gloves. Wringing the gloves in his hands nervously, Neville slowly nodded his head. “I-I don’t know w-what happened... b-but you did k-kill them?” The question was more of a statement.

Harry sighed softly. “After they ambushed me and tried to kill me, yes, I killed them in self-defence.”

Neville flushed slightly. “But what about G-Ginny? And the twins?”

Harry became silent and studied Neville’s face. The boy was clearly torn with worry and something else, something that kept his cheeks rosy and his demeanour uneasy. “You like her?” Harry asked quietly. “I thought you had something with Hannah.”

Neville paled a bit before trying to look at Harry and failing. Returning his gaze to the gloves which were being silently tortured, Neville shook his head. “I used to. S-She’s special, you know? She was a-always so nice to m-me...”

As Neville’s voice trailed off, Harry realized that Ginny had probably just seen Neville as a friend, and Neville had eventually outgrown his crush. Ginny, however, would always be special to the boy as his first crush. Harry had vague memories of his first crush in school, and he knew that he would always be fond of her in a slightly nostalgic way.

Deciding to answer Neville’s question since the boy was being painfully honest with him, Harry sighed and motioned Neville to join him on a bench by the tools. “Those three came along during the fight, Neville.” Harry paused to play with his own gloves for a moment. “At the time, I was trying to defend myself from people trying to kill me. They jumped into the fight without realizing what that might mean to me.”

Harry realized that he was telling a half-truth and that he wanted Neville to understand. “I was also a bit out of it. The first round of

curses hit me hard and knocked me for a loop. I would have attacked Dumbledore if he stepped into the middle of things at that point.” Harry leaned back a bit. “Ginny stopped me before I could hurt them as well, Neville.”

Neville stopped playing with his gloves and started fondling one of the trenching tools. His devotion to Herbology was apparent to Harry from the wistful look on the boy’s face as he absently played with the tools of his trade. That Harry had yet to lash out at him seemed to be giving his confidence a boost. “But you would have hurt them, too?”

Harry sighed. “I’d like to think not, Neville, but the reality was that I was in no condition to determine who was safe and who wasn’t. Yes, I would have hurt them, too. Rather badly, I imagine.”

Neville put the trenching tool down and started playing with his hands as he worked his way through whatever was still causing trouble inside his head. Harry waited patiently for the boy to make up his mind. Neville finally held out his right hand, showing Harry the steel ring around the pinkie finger. “They said you made these. I had to sign an oath about them. Are you D-Dark, Harry?” Neville was shaking slightly, almost as though he expected Harry to finally strike him down.

Harry felt saddened by Neville’s question. He should have seen this coming. He pulled out his wand, Neville flinching as he did so and obviously expecting to be attacked. Harry shook his head before holding the wand up in front of himself. “I, Harry James Potter, do solemnly swear upon my magic that I am not Dark, I have no intention of going Dark, and I do not secretly practice Dark magic.” The soft glow that surrounded Harry’s wand was silent testimony to the truth of his oath.

Neville exhaled slowly and leaned forwards, elbows on knees. Breathing deeply for a few minutes, Neville looked at Harry and slowly nodded. “Alright, Harry. I’ll trust you for now.”

Harry decided that maybe Gryffindors really were brave after all, despite what Floppy said. “Thanks, Neville.”

“You know most of the school thinks you’re Dark and that you’re going to kill more students, don’t you?” Neville inquired cautiously.

Harry shrugged. “They can think what they want, Neville. I feel no need to explain my actions. You were able to confront me in spite of your fears, which took a lot of courage. I respect you for that. I felt that you deserved the truth because you acted like an adult and braved your fears, asking out of concern for others. But all those who just want to whisper or talk about me behind my back, well, that’s not my problem, and they’re frankly not worth my time.”

Neville was silent for a few minutes while he pondered Harry’s statement. “Alright. I’ll keep your confidence on this. You know it will just get worse, right?”

Harry smiled absently. “What will be, will be, Neville.”

Neville got to his feet before putting his gloves on, more relaxed but still a bit shaky. “I thought we’d try to see what you already know, Harry, then go from there... is that okay?”

Harry nodded before standing up and putting his own gloves on, following Neville to the first row of plants at the front of the greenhouse. Maybe he would still have a friendly face or two left by the end of the day.

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Mon, 4 Sep, 9:07

Harry supposed that being in a Herbology lesson with the Hufflepuffs, given how they reacted to his sitting at their table, should have been a predictable disaster. What before had been uncomfortable silence from the majority of Hufflepuffs at their table was now the closed rank of uniform antipathy. Most surprising was Professor Sprout’s similar manifestation of almost open hostility. The kindest label he could attach to her demeanour was distantly cold.

Throughout an apparently standard O.W.L.-year speech emphasizing the importance of doing well, studying hard, expecting large

workloads, and more drivel that Harry was disinclined to listen to, he observed the students around him. The Gryffindors, for the most part, avoided being close to him. The Hufflepuffs actively shunned him and put as many Gryffindors between him and their group as possible.

As Sprout began outlining the activities for the day and week, Harry sighed in contemplation of how life was going to be at Hogwarts. Somehow, Harry decided, he needed to get even with Remus and Sirius for talking him into coming to the school in the first place. He understood that with the loss of Nicolas, he needed more than they could offer, but it seemed unlikely that Albus would be providing aid any time soon. True, some of that was due to Harry's actions, but it seemed that most of the delay was due to the Headmaster's own prior inactions.

As they broke into partner groups for the lesson, Neville told Hannah that he needed to keep working with Harry and invited her to join them. Her refusal left Neville puzzled, and the subsequent complete avoidance of Neville by Hannah left him more confused as the lesson progressed. She ignored his inquiries and attempts at conversation, finally going so far as to move with her partner to a more distant table.

For his part, Harry was deeply impressed with Neville's knowledge and understanding of what they were doing, but more importantly, why the plants mattered. Apparently, Neville kept his own greenhouse at home, which was of sufficient size to rival one of Hogwarts' teaching greenhouses. The mix of plants Neville had, however, tended more towards the exotic than the basic ones found at school. It saddened him to think that because Neville was willing to give Harry the benefit of the doubt and continue tutoring him, Hannah might become lost to Neville.

Harry saw Ginny enter with her brother Ron and Hermione, but she avoided making eye contact with him and kept to a table on the far side of the greenhouse. Resigned to more unpleasant conversations in the near future, Harry tried his best to keep up with Neville's instructions, but the combination of hostility, glances, and whispers slowly nudged his frustration into high gear.



Only Neville was willing to buck the trend, and while he was still nervous with Harry, by the end of their nearly three hours of working together, including the private tutoring period, the boy no longer seemed afraid. He tended to avoid casual banter, but his passing comments on the work they were doing and the applications filled the time with trivia and facts that Harry hastily scribbled down in his Muggle-style notebook. He would never understand why anyone chose parchment and quill for taking notes in a classroom. Official communication was one thing, as was turning in assignments he supposed, but it was so much cleaner, faster, and easier to use a notebook during lessons. Parchment would only be in use when absolutely necessary.

Harry had heard his mentors discuss the herd-like mentality of many in the magical community, but this was becoming his first sharp experience in the phenomenon. Despite the public knowledge that Rita Skeeter was less than an honest reporter, everyone was more than ready to accept her sensationalistic spin on events. Her clear sympathies for the pure-blood families made Harry rather curious about who supplemented her income. Making a mental note to discuss the press situation with Remus, Harry longed to escape the castle and the dangerous groupthink of its inhabitants.

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Mon, 4 Sep, 11:04

Harry walked towards Hagrid's cabin, heading for the back of the building. His schedule said that Ginny would meet him here, but he was not sure whether she would actually show up. Throughout the Herbology lesson, she had avoided being near Harry, which was to be expected. Ron had kept up a running commentary under his breath that Harry was certain concerned him. The ominous looks he had received from the gangly boy assured him that the commentary was less than friendly. The Daily Prophet prominently sticking out of Ron's bag was a sure sign that things would be tense in the dormitory that night. Perhaps he would need to take steps to minimize the fallout within Gryffindor House.

To reach his tutoring session, Harry had opted for the expedient method of simply walking immediately and not trying to talk to or wait for Ginny. Harry felt that if he had chosen to wait for her after class by the greenhouse, between the other students and his presence, she would have been put under enough pressure to further resent and avoid him. Hopefully, with a bit of space, she would have the chance to reflect on whether she still wanted to tutor him, as well as decide how to deal with her brother.

Ultimately, if she was going to show up, she would. Otherwise he would use the time to try to write a letter to Remus outlining the situation. A lot of unexpected events were occurring, and he was in need of some solid advice. Perhaps if Remus was able to think about it before Harry arrived this afternoon, they could have a more useful discussion.

Finding a large porch on the back of Hagrid's cabin, Harry sat down on the two steps leading to it and dropped his bag behind him. Trying to reach a state of calm through a few basic breathing exercises, Harry watched the clouds crawl by. Since Herbology had ended nearly twenty minutes prior by Harry's watch, he was coming to the conclusion that Ginny would be a no-show.

Glancing around before leaving, he was mildly surprised to see Ginny walking around the cabin toward the porch. She was watching her feet as she walked, apparently lost in her own thoughts. When she looked up and saw Harry, what little colour she had drained quickly as she slowed to a stop directly in front of him.

Harry sat back for a moment, trying to decide how to talk to the redhead. There were things he needed to say, but more importantly, he needed to apologize to her. The silence between them seemed to stretch forever, as neither appeared to know how to start. Finally, Ginny broke the silence.

"Harry," Ginny said while looking anywhere but at him, "I'm... sorry... for what I did to you."

Harry felt thunderstruck that she would be the one apologizing to him. "Er, Ginny, why are you sorry? I'm the one that was about to attack you."

Ginny settled her gaze back to the ground, shifting uncertainly on her feet. "I lost control," she said quietly. "All of that... what was happening... we only saw the last little bit... and the bodies, and the blood... and it made... made me feel really sick... I'm sorry for losing control and for hurting you."

Harry sighed and ran one hand through his hair as he gazed at some of the clouds from his seat on the back porch steps. "Ginny," Harry tried again, "you have nothing to apologize for. Bloody hell, when I went back through the memory of what happened in a Pensieve before breakfast, it made me sick." Ginny still refused to look at Harry. "Do you know what would have happened if you hadn't stopped me?" Harry asked.

Ginny sank down onto the grass. "You didn't know if I was going to attack you, did you?"

Harry shook his head, although she was still looking away. "No, I wasn't even aware of who you were. I just knew that my life was at risk, and I was taking steps to stop that risk." Harry reached down and picked up a long blade of grass, slowly shredding it as he rested his arms across his knees. "I was well on my way to killing you, actually. I don't think you'd be here if you hadn't stopped me, Ginny."

The silence stretched between them again. Blowing the grass fragments off his hands, he looked back at Ginny. "I'm sorry for that. I should have realized you weren't there to join in the attack. I'm sorry for what I did, or almost did, to you and your brothers."

Ginny shook her head but still refused to look at Harry. Harry was starting to understand that she was still struggling with some internal issues that had left her rattled.

Harry leaned forward, slowly reaching out and placing one hand on her shoulder. Ginny raised her head, and he could see that her brown eyes were overly bright. "Thank you, Ginny, for doing what you did.

You saved yourself, you may have even saved Fred and George, and you certainly saved me from myself. I would have been pretty broken if you hadn't stopped me and I had done the unthinkable. So, thank you." Harry tried for a smile, but he knew it was half-hearted at best.

Ginny looked back down at her lap. Harry retracted his hand and waited for her to get her thoughts under control, reverting to his cloud-watching. He felt there was more they should say, but first they needed to get past this moment.

Heaving a great sigh, Ginny wiped at her face briefly before getting back to her feet. "Right," she said, clearly trying to be calm and collected, "I guess we should start with the basics, so that means the old Flobberworm, so..." Ginny trailed off in a whisper before turning and walking quickly toward the edge of the forest, leaving Harry to follow.

Harry felt mildly distressed that their budding friendship had probably just taken a fatal blow, but he accepted this change as the inevitable outcome of his actions. His life never really let him have normalcy beyond a few illusory moments that would be snatched away at the first opportunity.

Sighing as well, Harry got to his feet and followed the now taciturn girl toward some workbenches Hagrid had set up for the two of them. Harry realized as he followed her that those other things would apparently end up remaining unsaid. It was going to be a long, painful tutoring lesson.

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Mon, 4 Sep, 12:13

Ginny left Harry to clean up their work area while she proceeded to lunch in the Great Hall by herself. Harry remained behind Hagrid's cabin after he finished, collecting his thoughts. Deciding that he was already reaching his limit with tolerating stupidity after the Herbology lesson, it was clear that another private meal with the house-elves was required.

Just as he was beginning to unwind and relax around the elves, who treated him no differently than they had the first time he ate with them, Dumbledore arrived to ruin his contentment.

“I had wondered if you would be here, Harry.” Dumbledore took a seat opposite him. Several elves rushed over to place a bevy of food in front of the Headmaster. “I have heard that your reception since returning has been rather lacklustre, to say the least.” Harry watched the Headmaster casually drink from his goblet of juice.

Shrugging in response, Harry merely kept eating, deciding that he would ignore the man’s presence. Given how he felt about Snape and the article, he was unclear on how any interaction they might have would turn out. It was better to keep quiet and figure it all out later when he was under less scrutiny.

“I was not surprised that you did not appear for lunch. Tell me, Harry, have you relayed the real events to anyone as yet?” Dumbledore seemed content to make light conversation of the recent events, which was somewhat surprising to Harry.

Leaning back for a moment, Harry nodded briefly. “Neville.” Pausing for a moment, Harry looked at the Headmaster. “To a lesser extent, the three Weasleys.”

The Headmaster gave Harry a bland smile. Their conversation could have been about the weather for all the emotion he was expressing. After Dumbledore finished the fruit he was working on, he looked back at Harry with a slight twinkle in his eye. “I had thought to ask a boon of you, Harry.”

Harry raised one eyebrow in response.

Dumbledore chuckled softly. “As you noted on your schedule, we are due to meet this evening, Thursday evening, and Saturday and Sunday mornings. I wish to skip our meeting this evening and move it to tomorrow.”

Harry shrugged, completely indifferent to the idea. The last thing he wanted to do today was sit in an office and pick over the history of the diseased carcass also known as Riddle.

Dumbledore leaned forward, causing Harry to look up at the Headmaster. "I intend to talk to Severus tonight in your place, Harry. I wish to explore those questions you have raised."

Harry blinked for a few moments before pulling his wand out. Grabbing an empty goblet from a tray behind the table, Harry copied his memories of Snape's actions that morning and placed them into the receptacle. "Here's another one for you, Headmaster. I'd love to know how he got around your questions last night, as I find it very clear he is involved in this somehow."

Dumbledore looked at him shrewdly before accepting the goblet. Bringing forth his own wand, Dumbledore swirled the memory before placing it onto his wand and directly inserting it into his own mind. Harry watched in fascination, knowing that anyone who was not very skilled could literally fracture their mind by doing that. Harry would never even attempt it, regardless of how urgent the situation was. It was far safer to use the buffering mechanism a Pensieve provided. Dumbledore's eyes glazed over for a long moment before he blinked backed to awareness.

The Headmaster leaned back in his seat before staring at Harry in contemplation. "Indeed, Harry, you have raised yet more questions. I shall, with your permission, show your memory of what happened yesterday to the combined faculty this evening as well. Hopefully they will be able to help the other students understand." Harry grunted noncommittally before returning to his lunch.

After a moment, Harry looked up and started a new thread. "I believe, Headmaster, that I am going to require some private sleeping arrangements. The... tension... among the others in the school is sufficient that I worry for their safety." Harry left the reason for his worry unspoken.

Dumbledore inclined his head. "I believe we can make the necessary arrangements, Harry. For tonight, why don't you stay with your

mentors and return tomorrow morning. We can discuss further arrangements tomorrow evening during our meeting.”

Harry eagerly agreed to this suggestion. While not as relaxing as he had desired, he found that the presence of the Headmaster did not disturb him as much as he expected it would. The two of them ate the remainder of their meal in an almost comfortable silence and then parted ways, Harry to class and Dumbledore to his normal activities.

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Mon, 4 Sep, 1:01

Attending a joint lesson with the Slytherins was bound to be entertaining. Having realized he was being ostracized by nearly the entirety of the Hogwarts population, he supposed it should have come as no surprise that only Neville would be near him during the lesson. Ginny resumed her distant milling amid the pack of Gryffindors, while the Slytherins kept a baleful eye on him. For a moment, he was disconcerted to realize there were only four Slytherins present, before he did the math to realize that he had eliminated six in his own year and apparently one from a different year. He wondered if all fifth-year Slytherins were enrolled in Hagrid’s class.

Hagrid himself seemed to be at a loss of how to treat Harry. On the one hand, Harry could almost swear that the half-giant wanted to take him aside as a long-lost friend. On the other, Harry thought the man had no idea whether or not Harry should be treated as a half-wild and wounded animal ready to attack at the slightest provocation. In the end, Hagrid resorted to smiling a lot and encouraging Harry as much as he could to work hard. Hagrid had even offered extra lessons on the weekends if Harry wanted some more hands-on time than the work he was going to be covering with Ginny.

For his part, Neville seemed to be more resigned to Hagrid’s class than particularly eager to be there. He warned Harry repeatedly, while Hagrid was giving a bog standard O.W.L. warning speech, that Hagrid had peculiar notions about what was interesting and worthy of study.

Following the half-giant, who was carrying a large carcass slung over his shoulder, into the Forbidden Forest, Harry walked with Neville at the back of the group, noticing how all the other students were striving to keep some distance between themselves and the two stragglers.

Harry and Neville caught up with the group once they stopped in a wide clearing, and the body of students parted soundlessly as they approached. It was beginning to both amuse and anger Harry that they almost behaved like a crowd of serfs, parting before a lord – or in this case, a perceived Dark Lord in Harry.

As Hagrid tried to draw attention to the carcass being eaten by Thestrals, Harry just tuned out the people around him and studied the vaguely horse-like creatures. They looked like a cross between Stephen King's imagination and Dr. Seuss' rendition of said imagination. Hagrid's sudden question about who could see the animals left Harry curious about who would raise their hands. His own hand was half-raised in a vague gesture towards participation, but he was surprised that Neville also had his hand up.

The silence stretched as most students were staring at Ginny, who kept her hand down. Harry took this as another sign that she had yet to come to grips with the deaths she had witnessed. It was less than one day later, so there was no reasonable expectation for her to see the Thestrals yet.

Hagrid must have perceived the situation, since he started explaining about how seeing someone die was not enough to see a Thestral. You had to understand death itself, which was much harder. You could really only do that after seeing someone die and then coming to terms with what that meant for your own future date with the Grim Reaper.

Every life form had both a birth-day and a death-day, and all the moments in between were unknown. Those two moments, however, were inevitable, even for supposedly immortal creatures like the phoenix. Someday, Harry would help Tom Riddle realize that.



Following Neville's lead, Harry pulled out a sketch book and began drawing what he saw, writing notes as Hagrid talked to them about the wonders of the creatures.

Harry thought the Thestrals looked sad as they studied the humans who were trying to see them. He supposed that if the only people who could see him had watched someone die, he might be sad as well.

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Mon, 4 Sep, 2:09

The presence of Dolores Umbridge in the mixed Gryffindor and Slytherin class for Defence Against the Dark Arts caused Harry significant disquiet. He watched her from the back of the classroom, appalled at almost everything about her.

Her taste in clothing bordered on the criminal and did nothing to make her already unpleasant physical characteristics any less objectionable. Rather, they almost enhanced the effect, rendering him somewhat speechless that Aurors allowed her to walk around without fining her for her appearance. Surely there was some obscure law in the books that could be used to arrest her. Harry made a mental note to check with Remus if there was one, after he had shown him how the woman dressed.

While bothered by her appearance, he was more disturbed by how she expected a room full of fifteen-year-olds to respond and to dutifully do as they were told – no matter how nonsensical the instructions – as though they were all Year 1 students in primary school.

Harry was further horrifyingly fascinated by the foolishness Dolores Umbridge was displaying. Not teaching spells? Only studying theory? It seemed that Hermione's primary acceptance for figures in authority was being put to the test as she continued to argue with the so-called Professor of Defence.

“Come now, Miss Granger, you surely aren't expecting to be attacked during my class?” Her simpering smile and saccharine,

patronizing tone were enough for an already aggravated Harry to begin grinding his teeth subconsciously.

Hermione looked surprised at the question. "But surely the whole point of learning Defence Against the Dark Arts is to practice defensive spells?"

Umbridge shook her head slowly, making a soft tut-tut noise at Hermione. "You are not qualified to decide what the 'whole point' of any class is. You will be learning about defensive spells in a secure, risk-free way—"

Harry would not have stopped the snort that escaped his mouth even if he could have.

"Yes, Mr Potter?" Umbridge asked with a false motherly voice.

"And you expect people to just walk up and attack us in a secure, risk-free way?" Harry's voice was loaded with sarcasm.

Umbridge's eyes glittered in the light as she stared at Harry. "You have all been led to believe by your prior and inferior teachers that you will be attacked at any moment. They have told you that Dark Wizards are around every corner, even that Death Eaters are still out there. These are all lies. The Ministry does not allow—"

"Right!" Harry said rather loudly. "Voldemort never existed, Death Eaters are figments of the imagination, and Draco Malfoy was the child of an immaculate conception!"

Umbridge's eyes shot wide as she pointed her stubby hand at Harry. "Twenty points from Gryffindor, Mr Potter! Do not make your situation worse!"

Turning her gaze back on the class, she continued her lecture. "I repeat! The Ministry does not allow Dark Wizards to move freely about. They are all in Azkaban! And when a new one rises," she said while malevolently staring at Harry, "we will stop them!"

Harry could feel the day wearing on him in a whole new light. The mere suggestion that the Ministry stopped Dark Wizards was laughable. "Oh, right, how could I forget how well The Ministry stopped Lord Voldemort!" Harry ignored the second round of sudden gasps around the room.

Umbridge smiled thinly at Harry. "Detention, Mr Potter." Turning back to the classroom, she ignored the issue Harry raised. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named no longer exists. His supporters were all tried, convicted, and put in prison. There! Is! No! More! Danger!"

Harry could clearly remember Nicolas Flamel dying. Harry could clearly remember Voldemort's resurrection, attended by Malfoy, Nott, and Pettigrew. Harry could even remember the voices and masks of the Death Eaters who Apparated to Voldemort's side when his resurrection was complete.

Quickly rising to his feet, Harry whipped his wand forwards and thought, "Stupefy!" His spell caught Umbridge completely unprepared and not only left her unconscious but also threw her violently against the wall.

Glaring at the Stunned woman, Harry merely grunted, "Bakka!" as she slid to the ground behind her desk. Gathering his bag, he left the shocked students behind him as he strode to the door. Finding it locked, he flicked his wand in an intricate pattern before the door exploded outwards in a shower of toothpick-sized splinters. Glancing back at the students, Harry saw most of them watching him with fear, except for two.

Ginny looked like she was about to be ill from the reminders of the violence she had witnessed less than twenty-four hours prior, and Neville was looking at Harry with sorrow clearly stamped on his face. For some reason, this just made his anger stronger. So much for having any friendly faces left by the end of the day.

Storming out of the castle, Harry exited the gates before placing his hand over his watch and saying, "Cobalt Sanctuary!" The jerk behind

his navel as he was whisked away from Hogwarts was actually soothing for a change.

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A/N:

Bakka means (approximately) “empty headed fool” in Japanese. You may find other transliterations of it spelled “baka.” Take your pick.

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to Chreechree and cwarbeck. Thanks to random folks for lending their Brit-picking data, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

## Chapter 11: ... and Perspective

Mon, 15 Dec 1986

Bzzzzzng! Bzzzzzng! That the phone was ringing was, in itself, not unusual. What was unusual was the fact that the owners had only recently moved into their new home, and very few people knew their latest address and phone number.

David Kepson reached out to answer the phone, a small frown on his face. While not an imposing man, at a mere five-feet nine-inches, David was reasonably fit for his late forties, weighing a proper eleven-and-a-half stone. His grey eyes flashed with a mix of curiosity and irritation. He was still on official leave for another week due to the relocation, and he had no wish to be disturbed with anything related to work. "Yes?"

"David?" the bright and energetic voice asked.

"Yes, this is David."

"I'm so pleased to have reached you!" David had a nagging feeling that he should recognize the voice, but the memory escaped him at the moment. He was still tired from the stress and headaches associated with transferring homes. "This is Jonathon at the Social Office."

David sighed. "Hello, Jonathon. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

David was momentarily distracted by the sound of the front door opening. His wife Margaret strolled in, two bags of groceries in her arms. Approaching fifty, she still had most of the colour in her dark-blond hair, whereas most of his dark brown hair had long since been consumed by grey. Numerous scattered boxes needed to be put away, and furniture waited to be arranged properly. The kitchen was finally ordered enough for them to start cooking again. And there was nothing in the world better than his Margaret's cooking.

“Yes, it has. How’s that new house over in Brighton? You’re off Waterhall Road, right?”

“It’s nice, we have a good bit of garden and a shed out back.” Rolling his eyes slightly at his wife, who was staring at him curiously, David decided to cut the small talk and make the man get to the point. “What can I help you with today, Jonathon?”

The brief pause on the other end of the phone told him that there was something odd going on. “Well, uh, David, you were with the program for nearly twenty years, and we never had any complaints from the children, their therapists, or anyone else. We’ve just got a new case, a really tough situation, and all the usual rules we follow won’t work. This kid, he’s only six years old, but we need to get him into a good home, somewhere away from the area.” Jonathon took a deep breath before finishing in a rush. “I know you and your wife wanted to lie low for a while, but you’re a perfect candidate home until we can get things worked out. This kid, this – er – Harry Potter, he has absolutely no one left in the world, David. No one. And he’s only six!”

David sighed heavily before looking at his wife. She was smiling at him, once again making it clear that long married couples had no secrets. “I can’t make any promises, Jonathon.”

Jonathon sounded incredibly chipper. “Of course not! All I want is for you to come in, and we can talk about it, maybe go see Harry in the hospital. Does that work for you?”

David looked around, but his wife was already moving into the kitchen with the groceries. She had managed to put on a few extra pounds over the years from active baking for her little side job of selling some of her best creations, but he still loved her dearly. She was far from heavy, but maybe just a little bit heavier than her short frame called for at 5’ 4”. He could almost smell whatever she was thinking of creating in their new kitchen. “Alright, I need to be in the city on Wednesday for some paperwork anyway. I’ll drop by in the late morning, then, shall I?”

“Perfect! Thanks, David. I’ll see you Wednesday!” As the line went dead, David wondered how he was going to discuss this with his wife.

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Wed, 17 Dec 1986

The Social Care office for the greater area known as Surrey was centred in Epsom, a little northeast of Little Whinging, and certainly far from the geographic centre of Surrey. It was, however, a very convenient location for the nearby rail station at Waterloo, and the small office was part of a row of similar little establishments on Adelphi Road.

David Kepson strolled briskly into the building, long since familiar with the slightly worn wallpaper and somewhat thin carpets. Navigating his way down the narrow hallway to the back of the first floor, he found Jonathon Taylor’s office door wide open and rapped smartly on the doorframe to signify his presence.

Jonathon looked up, smiled widely, and stood, waving David into the room. “Come in, come in! You’re looking good, David!” With a slight twinge of envy, David noted that Jonathon’s youthful appearance made it obvious that he was still clearly in his late twenties.

David walked in and nodded politely before seating himself. “Jonathon, it’s nice to see you. It’s been about six months now, hasn’t it?” David had been working with Jonathon for the past four years, ever since he had taken over the position from his predecessor. David liked the younger man well enough, although he thought that Jonathon’s enthusiasm could use a little curtailment; still, it was nice having one point of contact for all the paperwork and hassles the foster care program could generate.

Jonathon smiled in reply, sitting behind his desk and moving through a collection of oak-tag folders before pulling out the one he was looking for. “It has. You and Margaret were moving out to the Brighton area with that relocation from the shop, right? And you found that house I’ve got a picture of somewhere.”

“Indeed.” David cleared his throat. “Well, I’m a bit pressed for time, Jonathon. The missus is expecting me to be back as early as possible to try to get the downstairs furniture placed exactly how she wants it. That said, we’d like you to drop by for dinner sometime soon.” David made a vague gesture toward the folders scattered across the desk. “So, do you mind?”

“Right!” Jonathon flipped open the folder he had pulled out and extracted a glossy photo before sliding it across the desk. “Meet Harry Potter.” David ignored Jonathan for a moment as he became absorbed in the picture Jonathan had pushed in front of him.

“This is a bit of a rough story, so let me tell you the short version. Harry is an orphan – his parents were both killed some years back in what was assumed to be a traffic accident. We haven’t been able to track down the exact cause of death as we can’t find any records on them yet. Apparently his father, James Potter, was an only child, and his mother, Lily Evans, had one living relative, her sister Petunia.”

Flipping over a couple of pages, Jonathon leaned back in his chair. “Harry was sent to live with his aunt and uncle, but they treated him extremely poorly. They are both in processing for criminal charges of neglect, abuse, and assault, amongst other things. Harry has no living adult relatives that we’re aware of. His aunt and uncle aren’t cooperating, so we’re having a bit of a time trying to straighten out the records.”

Pulling out a map, he pointed to the southwest greater London area. “They were living in Little Whinging, which is why he’s in my jurisdiction. As you know, we usually try to keep the kids we get in the same schools, or at least in the general area, so as to minimize the shock of going into foster care. Unfortunately, this family spread a lot of nasty rumours and lies about Harry all around the community, so that’s not going to work. His own cousin is about the same age, and that boy went a little hog wild with the rumours and getting other kids to pick on Harry. The cousin has also been taken in and will probably be placed with a foster family while he gets some therapy, too.”



Sliding out a few other sheets of paper, Jonathon leaned back over the desk and tried to summarize the reports he had already received. "Harry went into hospital Friday night, and he's been there since. The doctors are up in arms over his malnourishment and general health. We've had a couple of preliminary psychiatric evaluations, and the best we can tell is that Harry is very clever – not a genius or anything, but definitely above average. One other thing - he doesn't react well to younger adults or even other kids. He only really relaxes around people somewhat near your age or older."

"Medically, the doctors think he'll be okay if he starts to eat right and gets plenty of vitamins. A physical-fitness program would help. Mentally, the best guess right now is that, more or less, he needs about a year of very intense therapy. The doctors recommend that he be pulled entirely from school for the rest of the year to be taught at home and put back into his year with the fall term."

Drumming his fingers absently, he looked back at David. "You know, it's quite funny how things have worked out. You and your wife moved out of the area, you're older, and you've got a lot of experience. It's going to take us months before we can notify the adoption agencies that he's available because of all the paperwork and the evaluations we're going to have to set up. But you and Margaret always wanted to maybe adopt one day, and... it's not perfect, but he's really a nice kid, David." His voice took on a wheedling quality. "It's really quite convenient for everyone, especially for Harry."

David watched Jonathon for a few moments whilst periodically glancing at the green-eyed boy in the picture. Having been a foster carer for so many years, he was intimately familiar with how every child had a heartbreaking story lurking in the shadows. After realizing they would never be able to have children of their own, he and his wife had decided to follow the foster care route instead of just adopting right away. It let them feel like they were truly helping others, and they had entertained the notion of adopting for the first few years. The children that came into foster care, however, tended to be older than what they were looking for. In addition, most of them came with a serious collection of problems. The years and heartaches had slowly overwhelmed them until they decided to leave the program

when his job sent him to open the first in a new chain of shops down by Brighton.

David weighed the options in his mind. Jonathon was asking for a long-term foster placement before the clearances could be obtained for adoption. That clearance would be dependent on completing a minimum course of therapy. And the child was young enough that he and his wife of twenty-five years could always petition to adopt Harry directly should they ultimately decide to do so.

David was curious to know what Harry's parents had looked like, given the boy's rather distinctive hair and eye colour. He finally realized that the boy's single most distinguishing features were his eyes. They were such a vibrant green, staring out from a handsome face marred by bruises and contusions. The marks of physical abuse would soon heal and fade away, but the boy's overall facial carriage fairly screamed out sorrow and misery. Could he turn his back on an innocent?

"Alright, Jonathon. Let's go meet your ward, and then I'll talk to the missus and see what she thinks."

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Fri, 19 Dec 1986

"Well, Harry, I'm glad that you and David and Margaret have enjoyed spending so much time together yesterday and today. I'm very happy that you've got a new home to go to, and you'll even get a chance to learn how to fish down on the water," Jonathon said.

Behind Harry, David and Margaret shared a wry smile. They were tired and their hands were still shaking a little due to the incredible volume of paperwork they had to sign as required in the foster care guardianship transfer. David flexed his cramped fingers – the amount of red tape became more and more daunting every time they went through the process.

Jonathon escorted the Kepsons and Harry to the foyer of the Social Office. Smiles and handshakes were exchanged, and Harry even offered a hesitant but almost tangibly real smile to everyone. They all looked up in surprise when the front door slammed open and a large man entered, yelling for someone named Cynthia.

Cynthia, a medium height honey-blonde woman, shot to her feet from the waiting area sofa where she had been sitting with her son, a dark-haired boy slightly smaller and younger than Harry. The boy immediately hid behind her back, his eyes wide and frightened.

David and Margaret moved in front of Harry, alarmed at both the man's size and the overt aggression clear on his face, while Jonathon slowly held up his hands in a non-threatening manner and asked what the problem was.

This only seemed to enrage the big man further, as he began screaming profanities and threats at all and sundry, while other social workers began pouring out into the hall to see what the problem was. As the man stalked closer toward Cynthia, Jonathon placed himself between the two groups and promptly was punched in the head for his efforts.

As Jonathon fell to the floor, the little boy started screaming, and the large man continued swearing as several other social workers jumped on top of him to get him under control. It took them a few minutes to get the man down in submission, and it was only then that someone noticed the fire raging in several rooms on the ground floor.

A sudden exodus of people spilled from the building. Two men half-dragged, half-shoved the now unconscious man who had started the fight out into the street. Another man helped a slightly dazed Jonathon out to the front of the office complex before crossing the street. In the distance, the siren song of a fire truck rang out over the shouts and noise from the in-building alarms and sprinklers, which had activated while the escapees were crossing the street. The sprinklers, however, seemed inadequate for the size of the blaze that was rapidly spreading to neighbouring offices. The egress of dozens of people from multiple row offices crowded the sidewalk, and most

people ran across the street to get away from the flames and billowing black smoke.

Jonathon staggered over to the Kepsons and Harry, motioning for them to follow him back toward the main road. As the group of four began walking toward East Street, right by the junction with High Street and Church Street, Jonathon apologized over the increasing wail of the approaching sirens. "Sorry about that, everyone! It's pretty rare we have a scene like that, but it does happen."

David placed a comforting hand on Jonathon's shoulder. "Are you okay? Think you need to sit down?"

Jonathon shook his head. "No, thanks, David. I'm sorry, but it seems like all that paper work has been lost. I'll have to come out to your place someday and go through it all again. You know, it's funny – we were due to get a new computer system any day now to replace the one they took down back in October. If we had it, this fire wouldn't matter much. As it is, we're all going to be scrambling to recover what we've each been working on for months. What a mess."

Jonathon and David turned to see Margaret talking quietly with Harry, her arm around his shoulders. Harry was clearly shaken and very pale, a slight sheen of sweat on his brow, most probably from the fear and stress of the situation. The doctors still had him on a few medications and cautioned that he not over-exert himself for a couple of weeks.

David gestured to a green Opel sedan by the curb and said, "This is us. Thanks for everything, Jonathon. Drop by when you can."

Jonathon was rubbing the side of his head absently while nodding at David. "No problem. You've got all the forms for the therapy, the doctors, the schools, et cetera. Until we can get all that red tape squared away, they give you complete guardianship of Harry. I'll be out to re-do the paperwork so we have the right records at the Office at some point, right?"

After David and Jonathon shook hands, Margaret gave the young man a kiss on the cheek before Jonathon bent forward and shook

Harry's hand. "It was nice to meet you, Harry. I hope you enjoy your new home."

Harry solemnly shook Jonathon's hand. The boy still looked nervous and worried over the fire. As Margaret and Harry climbed into the back seat, Jonathon leaned over to David. "Look, David, I'll be sure the application for adoption status gets delayed for a while, even with the therapy and evaluation issues, right? You can take all the time you want to help Harry get settled in before you and Margaret make up your mind. I know he's got issues, but this is pretty much that perfect case you always told me you hoped to get, a real child to raise. Give it a try, eh?"

David smiled slightly. "We'll see, Jonathon. We've been round this thing a time or two before. Thanks for the chance, though." Clapping Jonathon on the shoulder one last time, David climbed into the Opel and made sure everyone was buckled in. Easing out toward East Street, David was careful to give a wide berth to all the emergency vehicles arriving on the scene of the fire that was now consuming the entire row office building.

As David sat at the intersection waiting for traffic to give him an opening, he failed to notice Jonathon, shaking his head slightly while rubbing his face, step off the curb in front of a police car.

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Mon, 4 Sep 1995, 14:36

A modest two-storey house with a light beige exterior, dark brown trim, and matching shutters stood in the middle of a large single-family plot. There was a neat lawn in front, and a lush garden surrounded the rest of the house. Several large trees dominated a rear corner of the garden, providing a secluded area where, if they were inclined to do so, a wizard could Apparate without fear of being accidentally spied by inquisitive Muggles.

It was also the only point at which you could arrive and not be automatically Splinched into at least three or four pieces. Having watched Remus work out the disruption fields the hard way, Harry

needed no encouragement to take it very seriously when learning to Apparate. He had yet to Splinch himself, and if luck held, he never would. It looked downright unpleasant.

It was in this area that Harry arrived after Portkeying from Hogwarts. He managed to keep from landing awkwardly by taking half a step forward on landing. He could feel his tension leaving him as he stood gazing at the place he had come to call home. The familiar smells and the warm sunshine streaming through the trees drained most of the resentment Harry was feeling at the world in general as he took deep breaths and began meditative exercises.

After a few moments of peace, Harry shook himself back to alertness and re-centred his mind. As Harry quickly scanned his surroundings and identified himself to the wards around the edges of the property, Floppy gave a sudden lurch on his head.

“Mr. Potter, I believe we should talk.”

Harry sighed. “What now, Floppy? I can’t say I’m exactly in the mood for word games.”

“Do you recall my warning, Mr. Potter?” The Hat seemed unusually tense, even by Harry’s limited range of experience with the emotions of magical artefacts.

“Er, which one?” Harry knew that Floppy had been trying to score several points ever since he put the Hat on his head, but recognizing which particular dire warning the Hat was referring to was challenging.

“Do you think I’ve given you more than one, Mr. Potter?”

Harry could almost swear that the Hat sounded disappointed. “Well, you seem concerned about how I’m using magic, about the actions I’m taking, the prank I pulled and probably the pranks I’ve got planned, how I’ve been treating the Headmaster and his feral pet serpent, and you want me to be a social butterfly. Did I miss anything?”

Floppy was silent for nearly a minute before replying in a tone that sounded heavy and dull. "You missed nothing, yet everything, Mr. Potter."

Harry's rebuttal was cut short when a large black dog bounded out of the back of the house in front of him and ran toward Harry, barking like mad the entire way. As Harry was about to walk forward, Floppy suddenly enlarged and engulfed his head.

"Stop!" Floppy commanded.

"What?" Harry asked, alarmed as his vision was suddenly cut off. "What's the problem?"

"You know I cannot interact with anyone, even you, once you cross the threshold of the property, do you not?" Floppy asked, returning to his normal size.

Harry considered the implications of Floppy's question. "Do you have your own core, Floppy, or are you directly connected to the flux lines somehow?"

Floppy was inert for a long time before answering. "I have something that serves as a small core, Mr. Potter. It will keep me aware for one or possibly two weeks as long as I remain a silent observer."

"What happens after that, Floppy?" Harry asked, genuinely curious.

"You don't want to know, Mr. Potter. Please don't allow it to happen." Floppy's tone was both conciliatory and demanding.

"I understand, Floppy. I'll talk to you again in the morning, then, before we go back to Hogwarts." Without waiting for an answer, Harry crossed the invisible line and followed Sirius into the house. Remus would be home soon, and Harry was dreading yet anticipating the conversation that would follow.

Sirius and Remus both had permanent rooms in the house where David and Harry lived. Harry entered and, as he turned to close the door behind him, he was engulfed in a fierce hug from Sirius.

“How’s my favourite godson?” Sirius asked.

“Your only godson is okay, Sirius,” Harry replied wryly. Then, half-dreading the answer, Harry cautiously asked, “Did you get the morning Prophet yet?” No magical delivery system worked around the property, so someone always had to venture out on the days that they wanted to get a paper like the Prophet.

Sirius released Harry and took a couple of steps back, looking down at Harry from his slightly higher perspective. Sirius did not exactly tower over Harry these days, but he still had a few inches on him, even though those inches were rapidly diminishing as the years passed.

“You’re lucky you weren’t here when Moony saw that article, Harry.” Sirius shuddered briefly. “He came close to tearing out of here to get to Hogwarts. I had to literally sit on him to keep him from leaving. I think he was ready for another round with Dumbledore.”

Harry cringed. “Er, well, it wasn’t really Dumbledore’s fault...”

Sirius snorted while dragging Harry into the kitchen, pulling out a couple of butterbeers along the way. “Right. I’m sure you were defending yourself, or at least you better have been, or we’ll have real issues. But in the first place, it is Dumbledore’s fault for allowing the presence of students who would attack you.”

Harry sighed heavily but remained silent.

“Oh,” Sirius spoke up. “One of the Tribe stopped by this morning with a copy of the Prophet in hand. Grishnak, I think it was. I never could keep their names straight. Anyway, he said he’d come back tonight and see if you were in. He wants to talk to you and Remus together.”



“Uh, okay.” Harry was a little surprised. No one was scheduled to come out for another two weeks or so, but the coincidence with the Prophet article suggested a link of some kind. “I guess we’ll find out what he wants later.” Harry slumped into a seat along the wall. “Is Moony working today?”

Sirius shook his head. “No, he just ran down to the Alley to see if there’s been any news since this morning. He ought to be back—”

The sound of the front door slamming cut Sirius off, and Harry sank lower into his chair. “Sirius! You won’t believe what that idiot child did!” Moony shouted, his voice betraying his anger as he stopped in the hallway to take off his shoes. “I was in the Leaky Cauldron when word arrived that Aurors were being sent out to find and arrest Harry! He supposedly tried to kill a teacher!”

Sirius raised an eyebrow while glaring at Harry, who was in the process of slowly sliding under the table. “Is that so?” Sirius called back to Remus.

“When he arrives, we need to give him a good thrashing!” Moony was saying vehemently as he stormed into the kitchen. Apparently without even realizing Harry was sitting there, Remus sat down next to Sirius and put his head in his hands. “Can you believe it? Arrest Harry? What the hell was he thinking?” Moony demanded of the table.

“Errr,” Harry stared at the tabletop. “He probably wasn’t thinking at all?” His voice was nearly a whisper.

Moony’s head shot up, and he stared hard at Harry. Before Harry could try hiding under the table again, Moony grabbed his collar, and he was literally dragged half across the table, butterbeer flying everywhere. Harry was engulfed in a fierce hug that left him wondering if his ribs were going to break. When Moony finally released him, Harry looked up to see Remus glowering balefully at him as he sank back into his seat. “What the hell were you thinking?” the older man demanded in a loud voice.

Harry again started studying the tabletop. Realizing there was no adequate way to explain the events of the past days, he pulled the ponderous, stone, rune-covered "fruit bowl" toward him and swiftly emptied it of the fruit pieces. Wiping it clean with the hem of his shirt, he concentrated hard and deposited the memories of both the battle with the Slytherins and the entirety of the lesson with Umbridge into the Pensieve. Sliding the bowl in front of the two men, Harry waited while they plunged into the two memories.

After resurfacing, Harry was almost amused to see them do exactly what Dumbledore and Shacklebolt had done. They stared at each other for a moment before plunging back in for a second viewing. Harry took the time to clean up the mess of the spilled butterbeer with the flannel from the sink.

When they came out the second time, Sirius looked at Harry and gave a low whistle. "Well, I can't fault you for the battle, Harry. I'm not really pleased with how you dealt with that teacher, but I can understand why you blew your top."

Harry looked hopefully at Remus, who was staring out the windows of the kitchen into the back garden. "I don't know, Harry. I'm not happy with this. And the bit with the Aurors..." Remus trailed off.

Remus turned and looked at Harry. "You know the law better than I do, Harry. It's been part of your mental training for a while now. How precarious is your position?"

Harry shrugged absently. "I've been trying to avoid thinking about it. She could press charges, but I could probably press charges in return for her teaching deliberate lies. I don't think either one of us would win, but it would be a real mud fest. I'd need to walk through it with our barristers."

Harry played with the flannel for a few moments, trying to guess how things might play out and which laws might be relevant to the situation. "I think that I'd have to bet on Dumbledore. I doubt he will let it come to charges and public trials. He'll arrange some kind of in-school punishment for me and try to pass off the Auror thing as a big

misunderstanding. I don't know what he'll do to her – assuming that he'll do anything at all.”

Remus looked steadily at Harry. “Let's skip the battle for a moment. Why did you really attack Umbridge, Harry?”

Harry shrugged again. “Honestly? I couldn't take it anymore. The reactions I was getting from everyone, the roadblocks that have come up since the fight in the hall, and then her whole pack of lies... I wasn't about to let that slide. She was clearly wrong, she was clearly lying, and she clearly knew it.” Harry finished with a hard edge to his voice.

Sirius raised his hands in defeat when Remus looked at him, as if to signify that he was leaving the entire thing up to Remus.

Remus looked at Harry again. “Have you tried to clear the air with anyone?”

Harry made a see-sawing gesture with his hand. “A bit with Fred and George Weasley, but we didn't have time to discuss things properly. I tried to talk to Ginny, but she's pretty much avoiding me now – not that I blame her. The surprise was Neville Longbottom – he directly confronted me. I think he still harbours some protective feelings from an old crush on Ginny, and he wanted to know the truth. He knows more than anyone.”

Remus got up and fetched three butterbeers, handing one to each of Harry and Sirius before opening his own. “Why not the other students?”

Harry looked surprised. “You saw the way they were looking at me in that class. It was like that the whole day. No one was willing to come within five feet of me except Neville and the Weasley twins.”

Remus closed his eyes and sighed. “Harry, you're a big boy. You could talk to others if you really wanted to.”

Harry snorted. “Why would I want to? Most of them know Skeeter's full of crap, and they still blindly believed whatever that article said.”

Sirius smirked suddenly. "Even the Weasleys?"

Harry narrowed his eyes at his Godfather. "Not the twins. Or Ginny either, for that matter. Why?"

Sirius winked and smiled. "No reason, Harry. Do go on."

Harry shrugged. "What else is there? I'm a leper, or a Dark Lord, or a volatile unstable killer, or maybe all three, depending on who you want to ask."

"Give them a chance, Harry," Remus said in a placating tone. "You haven't even been there a week yet. No one knows you, and at the rate you're going, no one is going to want to know you, either!"

Harry smiled nastily. "Good. Then they won't get in my way."

Sirius shook his head slowly at Harry. "I wouldn't count on that, Harry. I can think of a few who are most certainly going to get in your way, whether you want them to or not."

"Oh?" Harry had a suspicion that Sirius knew more than he was letting on.

Sirius just shook his head and gestured for Remus to try again.

"Look, Harry, why are you at Hogwarts?" Remus asked.

Harry put down his bottle. "To get information from Dumbledore, to ransack his library, and to hopefully induce him to train me in the more advanced magic you guys can't do."

Remus dropped his head into his hands again and sighed loudly. "Okay, enough of that. We've clearly overtaxed your brain for today. You're going to have to work out those issues with Dumbledore first."

Remus pushed the Pensieve back to Harry, who promptly put the memories back in his head. Remus waited until Harry and Sirius

finished returning the fruit into the bowl and then rapped on the table to get their attention. "Let's talk about the fight."

Sirius leaned in. "What's the deal with that shield, Harry? You've been able to cast much better shields than that for years, and I never actually saw you perform the spell."

Harry gave a brief smile. "Right, let me explain about that..." Harry spent a solid ten minutes recapping the book on wards he was still working through, the implications about how wards could be tied directly to flux lines, and some of the experiments he had been conducting in the Come and Go Room. "... so, I thought that, since the book claims that wards can't be moved due to the changes in the flux lines, it was a problem with the ambient magical energy. Since Hogwarts is located where it is, I was hoping that I could get around that with a proper buffer. The problem turned out to be that the buffer just couldn't handle the load – the rocks would shatter under too much impact to the ward. That last rock that I was tinkering with still had a weak warding shield on it, so it flared up as soon as their first attack started. It couldn't take the brunt of that first onslaught, so it went the way of the other rocks, but a little more so and took my pocket and part of my hip with it."

Remus nodded slowly. "That makes sense, Harry. It's a good line of thought. I'll see if I can obtain more references on those ideas, or at least some negative knowledge results from others that we can use to investigate more."

"What about Snape?" Harry asked. "He's clearly involved, but Dumbledore swears he questioned him thoroughly. Although he's supposed to be giving Snape the third degree again tonight, now that I think about it."

"I don't know," Remus admitted. "I'd say that the whole thing doesn't add up. It's like when we were stalking Pettigrew and he was always one step ahead of us no matter what we did. It just... well, it feels funny, you know?"

Harry started suddenly as Remus' words triggered a faint memory. "Oh! That's right... I meant to ask you something..." Harry trailed off as he tried to remember what was so important to ask Moony about.

Remus looked puzzled. "What? You wanted to ask me something?"

Harry shook his head and ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "Argh! This is going to be killing me all afternoon now. Someone said something I wanted to ask you about, Remus. It was important, too!"

Remus chuckled slightly at Harry's antics. "What was it about?"

Harry glared at Remus for a moment. "Something about why magic did something. If I could remember what it was about, I wouldn't be so bothered, now would I?" he asked wryly.

Their conversation was brought to a sudden halt by a sharp knock on the back door. Looking outside, Harry saw the grinning face of an older Japanese man. Despite his small stature and greying hair, the man was obviously in prime shape, judging from the whipcord muscle evident on his arms and legs. Harry quickly waved to his friend outside and rose. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen, that's my cue for a good thrashing."

Remus laughed as he sat back and nodded politely to the man on the back porch. "Better you than me, Harry. Master Gata nearly took my head off when I said we weren't sure when you'd be back to continue your lessons. Sirius and I will talk about things some more, and then we'll all talk over dinner. Go enjoy your lesson."

With a smirk at Remus, Harry turned and strolled outside, following his trainer onto the short-cut grassy lawn. He knew that he was in for a rough few hours.

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Mon, 4 Sep, 7:29

The hot shower and change of clothes removed most of the damage visible on Harry, although he had a black eye that was forming nicely,

and his training clothes had required magical intervention to salvage. Remus had healed the open wound on his chin before his father came back from work, but there was no denying that Master Gata had pulled out all the stops during the afternoon's training session. For his part, Harry was feeling much calmer about life after the vigorous workout. Harry privately thought that 'workout' was probably too tame a word – 'drubbing' was probably a more accurate description of his session with the Japanese man. Master Gata even had some insightful advice for Harry regarding the fight in the corridor.

Harry's adoptive father came into the room and sat down beside Remus and Sirius just as Harry was putting the last of the dishes on the large table for dinner. Harry settled down on the other side of the table, with the goblin Grishnak on his left and two empty spots at his right. The vacant seat to the left of David was never taken. The seats at the head and foot of the table were, as usual, left empty out of respect for those not present. If too many people came, such that they would need to use the three empty spots, by unspoken agreement the dinner would be held outside with conjured furniture. Those three seats stood silent, waiting for their occupants, and would be for a long time to come.

After David thanked everyone for helping prepare dinner, the food was quickly distributed, and everyone began to enjoy their repast. Before Harry could finally enquire as to Grishnak's unexpected presence, two flying objects came in through the open kitchen window, a big ball of white feathers bounding for Harry and a ball of midnight black winging for the empty seat by Harry.

The white ball of feathers landed on Harry's shoulder and promptly bit his ear – hard.

"Hedwig!" Harry scolded her, "That was uncalled for!" The snowy white owl fluffed her feathers out and bit his ear a second time. "It's not my fault!" Ignoring his protests, the owl promptly smacked his head with one wing while biting his ear a third time, almost hard enough to break the skin. "Remus! Tell her it isn't my fault! You told me not to take her!"

Remus chuckled at the owl and held his hands out in a placating gesture. "Hedwig, it isn't Harry's fault."

David smiled tolerantly at his extended family and joined the laughter around the table as Hedwig continued to abuse Harry. Everyone's attention was diverted, however, when the other winged visitor transformed into a tall, thin man with light brown hair and grey eyes with a soft pop!

"What?" the tall man asked as heads swivelled his way expectantly. "Can't a gentleman stopping by for a visit get a simple 'Hello, how are you' instead of being subjected to discourteous stares? I swear, you people become more uncouth every day."

Sirius started laughing. "Edgar, the last few times you've arrived, you've been in a snit. We were waiting to hear the rant of the day."

Huffing slightly, Edgar sat abruptly in the empty seat. "I have not been in a snit as you call it. You try telling my brothers and sisters that they don't have to live like vampires and that a bit of sunlight is quite nice once in a while. That they should get out and about, that modern medicine is a wonderful thing. We'll see how well you fare with that, shall we?"

Hedwig had finally stopped punishing Harry and was grudgingly tolerating his attempts to placate her with food and affectionate petting. Remus looked Edgar carefully up and down before turning to Harry.

"Harry," he said, "I want you to identify something for me. It's human in appearance, thin, rather pale, tends to be a bit broody, generally avoids daylight, likes to dress in dark colours, has an insatiable thirst and appetite, and goes into a withered sleep if unable to feed." Remus and Sirius both put on expectant expressions as they stared at Harry with false adoration.

"Let's not forget the aversion to garlic, that's rather critical, isn't it?" Edgar asked dryly.



“Huh,” Harry replied, “that sounds just like one of those creatures that I’m supposed to be terrified of. I think I read about them in my Dark Arts texts. But which could it be? Oh, perhaps, maybe, just maybe, a... vampire?” Sirius chuckled at Harry’s whispered theatrics.

Edgar just ignored them as he helped himself to the food on the table.

Sirius looked at Remus in fake puzzlement. “But why would a vampire eat our food, and not us? For that matter, how can a vampire even eat our food?”

Edgar cut off Remus’ reply. “Variety, my dear Mr. Black, variety. This way the sharpness of the appetite is satiated, and I can savour the gradual draining of your delectable blood from those pulsing veins like a fine after-dessert wine.”

Sirius chuckled and elbowed Remus in the ribs. “That was a new one, Moony. How many more do you think he can come up with?” Remus rolled his eyes in response, winking at Harry.

While the comfortable companionship continued over dinner, Remus filled Edgar in on the latest happenings of their wayward protégé, even digging out the morning’s Prophet article for Edgar to read.

Edgar sat back contentedly after finishing his dinner and contemplated the wall behind Remus for a long moment. “I think those pictures are just about perfect,” he finally announced. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you were working that process out. Are you making copies yet? I want a set.”

Glancing at the poster-sized blow-ups of Snape and Dumbledore from his first hours at Hogwarts, Harry had to agree with Edgar’s assessment. The quality of the reproduction from the sensory monitor had some issues at that size, but the smaller pictures were clear enough for the new plan Harry had hatched during the afternoon talk with Sirius and Remus. While they had hopes that they might be able to develop moving pictures from the monitors, Harry was happy with the static images. Harry turned to Edgar and smirked. “Not yet. We have some more work to do with them first.” The glee in his voice was poorly concealed.

Remus called the attention of his scoundrel in training. "That reminds me, Harry. If the Weasleys are still in on your little effort to cut Snape off at the knees, that project is going to go into the next phase on Saturday. Then you've got that hearing in front of the ICW committee on Sunday. You do know that Saturday, the 9th, is a full moon, so I'll be out from Friday through Sunday, right?"

Harry nodded. "Don't worry, Remus. I'm sure Edgar is going to be with me at the ICW meeting just like always, and you know Cyril will be there since he's my new mentor. As for Snape, well, my involvement there is merely arranging the legal services for the Weasleys' action, right?"

Most of the people at the table were grinning with Harry, except for David, who looked a little concerned. "Son, are you sure this Snape person should be dealt with like this?"

At the look of surprise on Harry's face, as well as the frown from Remus and Sirius, David held up one hand to forestall any objections. "What I meant was that if you're successful in how you plan on handling Snape, then how will you know what he's doing later?"

Remus answered the question for Harry. "From what Harry has told us, I think that Dumbledore is beginning to question Snape's loyalties. Even if we don't succeed, Dumbledore will keep a closer eye on Snape. That oath that Harry pressured Dumbledore into will work for us in this case, since Dumbledore will have to keep Harry informed of Snape's activities."

Coughing slightly, Harry hesitantly brought up a potential problem. "This raises another issue. The Headmaster is going to push me to have all of you meet with him sooner or later. How do you want to handle that? And what happens when he pushes to come here?"

The room fell silent except for the soft rustling of Hedwig's feathers as she happily enjoyed Harry's absent-minded ministrations. One of her golden eyes was closed, making it appear as if she was winking at them.

Sirius spoke up first. "I say give him the coordinates and let him Apparate."

Remus winced. "Do you want to make one of the most skilled wizards alive angry with you, Padfoot?"

Sirius grinned in response. "He's not one of my favourites right now, Moony. He's not out there clearing my name, and he didn't push for me to get a trial. I think a little humility would do him some good."

Remus shook his head in exasperation. "No thanks, I don't want to be around when he gets his body reassembled. He's not going to be very friendly." Looking back at Harry, Remus asked, "Why bring him at all?"

Edgar laughed, causing Remus to frown. Edgar pointed one long, pale finger at Remus. "Surely you aren't that naive, Remus. I'd expect Albus already knows where Harry is. I'd bet that Harry had a tracer put on him long before he left Hogwarts."

Remus flicked his eyes to Harry, but Harry was only smiling beatifically. "Of course he did. I transferred it to someone's pet cat on my way out of the castle this afternoon. I was actually surprised he put it on me in such an obvious way."

Sirius gave Harry a high-five hand slap. "That's my boy!" he crowed.

Edgar just shook his head in disgust. "And you think there was just one?"

Harry and Sirius both froze and looked at Edgar. Remus started laughing. "Let's check, shall we?" Pulling out his wand, Remus ran through a few incantations before Harry developed a faint pink glow. "Ah, yes, it appears you fell for it just like he wanted, Harry. I thought we taught you better than that."

Harry hung his head low for a moment. "Well, he knows roughly where I am. He certainly doesn't know where this place is, since the disruptors will have blocked the signature as soon as I entered the

property. I'll certainly move it onto some random animal or student and scan more thoroughly before any future trips."

Remus nodded approvingly. "Good." Turning to Edgar, Remus inclined his head at the vampire's astute observation. "Good call." Edgar smiled in acknowledgement.

Remus turned back to Harry. "We can expect that Dumbledore will try to convince you to bring him here. Or he will probably figure out our location and just show up one day without warning. Since the latter scenario is more likely, it would probably be better to just bring him over if and when he asks. Try to delay him a few days so we can make sure all signs of our activities are cleaned up, but we'll go ahead and start planning for his visit. Anything else you think we should worry about, Edgar?"

This time Edgar shook his head. "Not right now. This weekend will be ... interesting."

"I have something I would raise. We are concerned about this article."

Everyone turned startled eyes to Grishnak when he suddenly spoke up. They had almost forgotten he was there. Any goblin that stopped over for meals usually remained silent throughout, only talking to their target in private afterward. They could count the exceptions to this pattern on one hand with fingers left over. While Remus and Harry had their suspicions as to why, they never pushed the issue. Edgar had never deigned comment on their speculations, so they were suspicious of what he knew on the matter as well.

"Oh? Personally, I found it amusing." Edgar affected nonchalance, but he was staring intently at Grishnak, as were Remus and David. Sirius played with the remains of his dinner, making little piles out of different things. Harry continued to groom Hedwig, content to let the others work out the meanings and undercurrents of the present situation.

Grishnak shook his head slowly. "To let such go without response will risk much."

Remus leaned his elbows on the table, clasping his hands under his chin. "Well, I don't see how this concerns the Tribes. Perhaps you could explore it a bit more with us?"

The friendly intimacy of dinner had vanished, to be replaced by a not-quite-comfortable silence. "The Tribes do not care, Mr. Lupin." Grishnak was toying with his messenger-status ring while contemplating his glass of ale. "It is the Business that cares."

Remus and Edgar exchanged a significant look, but Harry was confused. "Hang on," he cut in. "What do you mean the Business cares? This doesn't have anything to do with that."

Edgar cleared his throat before Remus or Grishnak could respond. "Surely, Harry, you do not expect your ... ventures ... to remain secret forever?"

Harry shook his head. "No, but I doubt they will be coming to light any time soon."

There was a look of profound disappointment on the vampire's face. "Harry, what have I been teaching you during our political discussions for the past three years? Have you not understood any of my historical discussions on this topic? Re-read the article, and tell me what's wrong with it."

Harry took a deep breath and tried to get his frustration under control. Slowly re-reading the article, Harry began to develop a new appreciation for the writing of Rita Skeeter. "She stretches the facts a bit, but there's nothing technically erroneous in the story."

"So what is the problem?"

Harry tried to organize his thoughts in a more cohesive manner. "It's the spin she puts on things. She characterizes with exaggeration, she asks questions and states rumours, and while none of it is presented

outright as factual, it reads as though each word she writes is indeed based on fact.”

Edgar nodded. “Right. And what have I been telling you about facts?”

“Facts are irrelevant; only perception matters,” Harry recited automatically.

Edgar nodded again. “And so...?”

Harry suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. He knew the vampire liked to play his little logic games, but the annoying problem was that the six centuries of experience made him correct far too often. “I need to launch my own campaign to provide a counter perspective.”

Edgar clapped his hands in a mocking imitation of golf spectators who were terrified of making noise to disrupt the so-called athletes. Harry shared Edgar’s view that if the sport required absolute silence and no physical contact among players, then it was more of a pretentious hobby than a real sport. Playing golf with air horns, explosions, or the occasional rugby tackle would be much more respectable, in his opinion, and make it truly qualify as a sport. “Now, let us assume that your activities become more public, shall we? What impact will this have on the Business?”

Harry felt the connection leap out. Ever since Edgar had taken over Harry’s historical and political lessons, the perspectives of so many other parties beyond wizards were introduced in a way that was simply amazing. The goblin people, for example, were broken into various enclaves, with each subset of enclaves ruled by a chieftain. The chieftain was said to rule over a Tribe of goblins. Tribes pursued many endeavours, but the truly fascinating part was that business activities were always separate from the political activities. In fact, Gringotts was the sole reason that wizards still tolerated goblins, and only grudgingly. The success of Gringotts and other less-recognized goblin ventures was dependent upon one critical fact.

Prior to leaving any Tribe to work at Gringotts or some other venture, each goblin pledged to twenty years of employment and for that time to completely set aside all political activities and only do what was

best for the business. It led to surly and irritable workers who wanted to be involved in the events around the world, but they all knew that their livelihoods depended on maintaining that neutral business status. So employed goblins grudgingly put up with the necessities of the situation.

Their neutrality also made them the perfect bankers, completely trustworthy in that role, despite how wizards and witches in general tended to view the so-called lesser creatures. The interesting bit was that every goblin rebellion only involved the Tribes yet never any business or business employees. The oath of service was magically binding, and to violate it was rumoured to be instant death.

Harry and his mentors had become rather intimately involved in some mutually beneficial business transactions that everyone involved wanted to succeed, albeit quietly. With the current image that Harry was projecting to the magical world, any revelation of a connection between Harry and those ventures would bring a heavy cloud of suspicion on the business. There was always the possibility that business efforts would fail. Truly disastrous, however, would be for Harry to be publicly perceived as a Dark Lord. Wizards would then question whether the rumoured oath of service was sufficient to assure neutrality and whether the Tribes might be sending workers without the oath of service into the world. The repercussions from that alone would be staggering.

Rather sheepishly, he looked at the assembled people around the dining table. "So, any bright ideas? The Prophet is the Ministry's mouthpiece, and they employ Rita. There's no other newspaper with as wide a circulation that we could use for our own purposes – well, nothing that's particularly respected."

After a few moments of indecision, Remus spoke up. "We'll just have to see what opportunities come up, Harry. I think it's safe to say, however, that you're going to need to start exerting some positive images to offset the current negative ones."

Harry sighed and put his head into his hands. "Wonderful. After exploding at that witch today, my reputation is probably down to the negative thousands. It's going to take a miracle to change it."

Grishnak chuckled. "Your afternoon's escapade, Mr. Potter, is a tale I shall relish recounting to the Tribes this weekend. They will enjoy it as we do, for that woman is most offensive. The Business will be rather disappointed, however. You understand – it's nothing personal."

Harry nodded while keeping his head in his hands. "Tomorrow will be such fun," he muttered to no one in particular. Dealing with the students, dealing with the Headmaster, dancing around Snape and Umbridge and the Aurors. And Cyril would be there watching everything.

Shortly after, the group broke up, most heading off to their own homes or beds. Harry was convinced that the next day would be another exercise in frustration, and he was somewhat hesitant to discover the repercussions of his temper tantrum with the idiot Umbridge and exactly how the Aurors were going to be involved.

Harry followed David to the study, where the two spent a pleasant time discussing life at Hogwarts as Harry had experienced it. In turn, David kept Harry informed of the latest events around the shop and with their friends. Every time Harry came back from a trip, even one as short as this three-day excursion to Hogwarts, they went through the same ritual, reaffirming their presence to each other. They carefully avoided discussing the three people so dear to them that were absent. Only when their yawns became more frequent did they agree to call it a night.

Completing his nightly routine, Harry paused on his way to bed to scratch Hedwig affectionately about her head. Opening the window all the way, Harry ruffled her feathers gently one last time before climbing into bed. "Good hunting, Hedwig," he called out softly. "Maybe I can talk Remus into letting you come with me soon." As his beautiful owl sailed out into the night, Harry tried to find some solace in what he hoped would be a dreamless sleep.

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A/N:



A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to cwarbeck and Chreechree. Thanks to random people for their aid with Brit-picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

On Rita Skeeter and the belief of her articles – bear in mind that no one knows anything about Harry except (a) he's suddenly re-appeared, (b) there were rumors of his going Dark, (c) Harry is rather violent and unpredictable, is he not?, and he has demonstrated as much, and finally (d) even in canon, people knew she was a gossip writer and sensationalist, yet they still believed her over Harry or Harry's friends...

## Chapter 12: Seeing

Tue, 5 Sep 1995

“Please, Hedwig,” Harry called out a bit plaintively, “don’t hold it against me. Remus said that until it’s safe, you can’t come with me.”

Hedwig was sitting on top of his bureau, nestled by the ceiling, ignoring her normal perch in the corner of the room. She was doing her best to ignore his attempts to say goodbye in any manner.

“Alright, well, I’ll leave your bacon here, then. I’ll see you this afternoon, girl.” Shaking his head at his owl’s attitude, Harry grabbed his bag and headed outside. The fresh early morning air was invigorating, but he could live without the dew that dampened his shoes.

Breakfast had been a relatively quiet affair, but everyone knew that Harry would be back shortly after 4 pm, so there was no reason to make too much out of his departure. Harry was just commuting a long way to school in some respects, even though he would seldom be spending the night at home. Harry had a light snack, knowing he would be eating a full breakfast at Hogwarts shortly.

David had given him a hug before he left, which was a little unusual, but then Sirius and Remus expediently half-shoved and half-threw him out of the kitchen and told him to make “nice-nice” with the locals for a change. Remus had turned up a small Pensieve for Harry to take, telling him to use it wisely but carefully.

As Harry crossed the threshold of the disruption field and then the wards, he stepped into the centre of the small cluster of trees. Looking around, he sat on a small tree stump and held his bag in his lap since he was less than keen on soggy books. “Alright there, Floppy?” he asked quietly.

“Indeed, Mr Potter. Experiencing your family is much different than merely seeing the memories of it.” Floppy sounded calm and

collected, a marked contrast to what the Hat's mood seemed to be the last time they had talked.

"So do you still wish to discuss things?" Harry asked quietly. "It's not quite seven yet, so we have time."

Floppy stirred restlessly, shifting from one side of Harry's head to another. Harry was mildly curious what that might indicate about Floppy's mental state, specifically whether if given a body the Hat would be wringing its hands or shuffling its feet.

Floppy finally sighed in a mildly dramatic manner. "I am in agreement with Mr Lupin. I am uncertain as to whether you are deliberately being obtuse or truly do not see the connections around you."

Harry laughed briefly. "Well, I'd be more inclined to say I'm just dense, but whatever suits you, Floppy. Since you've not got anything for me, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"You may, Mr Potter."

Harry shifted a bit to try to get a little more comfortable. "You scanned my mind in the hospital, and you most certainly saw enough to actually Sort me into one of those houses. Why haven't you officially Sorted me yet?"

Floppy swayed gently in a soft breeze blowing past, the slight tinge of salt discernible in the air even though the sea was some distance from their house. The scent was always particularly strong in the early morning, before all the traffic and shops disgorged their own odours into the air.

"Would you like to be Sorted, Mr Potter?"

Harry shrugged absently. "Doesn't really matter to me, Floppy. I simply thought that you might want to be done with riding around on my head."

“I find your argument specious, Mr Potter. You are the one tired of having to think about me riding around on your head.” Harry could feel himself grinning as the Hat recognised his misdirection. “I feel that to Sort you at this time would be dangerous, Mr Potter. Once officially Sorted, the expectations upon you will change, unlike your freedom with the present status you have.”

“Alright, Floppy. My other question for the moment is whether you will share with me how you were made, and perhaps teach me the magic involved?” Harry was almost certain the answer would be no.

Floppy transformed with a soft pop! into a riding bridle with blinders that a horse might wear when pulling a wagon. “Do I appear to be naive, Mr Potter?”

Harry laughed outright. “Okay, then, Floppy. Back to Hogwarts it is.” Glancing at his watch to note that it was almost now seven in the morning, Harry covered it firmly with one hand while saying, “Gaoler Central!” The swift jerk behind his navel left him stumbling slightly as he appeared in front of the gates at Hogwarts, and he absently noted that Floppy reverted into a battered wizard’s hat during the brief moment of Portkey travel.

The gates of Hogwarts, while probably imposing to someone who studied castle architecture, were imposing to Harry for a completely different reason. They radiated an aura of substantial size, and little magical sparks constantly emitted into the sky and ground like shooting stars from the aura. Whenever he saw a major magical artefact, he always took a moment to admire the view of minute sparks and flowing aura fields. He still struggled with looking in a mirror with Floppy on his head. Half the time he felt that his hair should be catching fire from the sheer quantity of sparks radiating from the Hat. Some day he would have to find a way to enable others to see auras and signatures like he did.

As Harry entered the corridor leading to the Great Hall on one side and the main staircases on the other, he noted Snape standing at the foot of the stairs, apparently lecturing two young students in the proper attire becoming Hogwarts students of Hufflepuff. Harry noted

absently that he had seen many Slytherins dressed in far sloppier fashion since his arrival, yet they had never garnered a reaction from the man.

Deciding that the timing was just about perfect since Snape was clearly in mid-rant, Harry popped a wand into each hand with a quick flick of his wrists and concentrated on weaving the patterns that Remus and Sirius had devised for the first stage of the Snape Spectre Spell. Harry then turned and cast a quick charm on the entry doors to the Great Hall.

With the last motion complete, Harry hurriedly tucked his wands back into his wrist holsters and entered the Great Hall, making a direct path for the Gryffindor table. It was early enough that only a few of the students were present, the rest still waking up or getting ready for the day.

Harry spotted two redheads sitting at the end near the Head Table and recognised the faces as none other than the self-titled titan titian trouble twins. Ignoring the vast wave of silence that spread among the students and staff in the room, Harry made sure to sit in such a way that he would have an unimpeded view of both the doors into the Great Hall and the path Snape would travel to the Head Table. Fred and George looked at Harry curiously, but he quickly whispered a terse command to them. "Not now!"

Fred and George spun around to stare at the entrance to the hall, but instead of matching Harry's look of calm gaze, they appeared somewhat confused. The sight of the three of them watching the doors to the Great Hall so closely caused most other students to begin watching the doors as well, glancing from time to time back at the trio. Without warning, the doors opened and Snape strode in, his cloak billowing behind him as he scowled at all and sundry. Almost immediately the bottom corner of his cloak twitched slightly. Harry leaned back slightly so his face would not be immediately recognised by Snape and started placing food on his plate.

While Fred and George settled into a deeper confusion and most students in the hall continued to watch either the pranksters or Snape,

the doors opened again as Dumbledore and Harry's new mentor, Cyril, entered the Great Hall.

Cyril Feiner had clearly been around the block on an extended tour, almost for the past century in fact. While his carriage was proud and, in some respects, regal, his slight limp and walking staff made it clear that his life had been less than peaceful. While not a necessarily well-recognised name among the general populace, in certain circles his name was spoken either with utmost respect or outright fear. Whereas Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody generated a feeling of nervousness in some individuals in the know, for those same people, Cyril generated a feeling of shortened life expectancy. Harry found this reputation oddly clashing with the man's appearance of a friendly grandfather. Cyril could pass as a distant relative to Dumbledore, with the only difference between the two men being the shorter beard that the former sported. His charcoal grey robes, complete with War Mage shoulder emblems, and the chain of full status around his neck were simple adornments. The lack of any other sigil or distinguishing item was unusual for one old enough to be a living contemporary of Dumbledore himself.

As Dumbledore and Cyril simultaneously spotted Harry and began moving toward him, Harry was aware of being recognised by Snape, who had made it to the Head Table without incident. The students, left somewhat confused over the lack of entrance effects by Snape, now focused on the impending collision between the two old men and the great unknown that was Harry Potter.

Harry rose to his feet when Cyril came to a stop opposite his seat and bowed from the neck. "Mentor," he stated calmly, "it is a pleasure to see you."

Cyril showed no reaction to Harry's greeting, which left Harry slightly puzzled. Dumbledore, however, cleared his throat loudly, and every set of eyes except Cyril's focused on the Headmaster.

"Mr Potter," the Headmaster began in a very loud and formal tone, "I am unable to accept your actions of yesterday afternoon. While Professor Umbridge may have been exaggerating her claims of the Ministry's prowess, your actions are inexcusable. Despite her claims

to the contrary, I know you made no effort to kill or actually injure the professor. If you had tried, she would not have been complaining about your failure to succeed. To that end, you are hereby placed under ban for all school-sponsored extracurricular activities for the next three months, and you are officially to be in detention for the next three months as well. The first month you shall serve with Mr Filch, the second month with Professor Snape, and the final month with Professor Umbridge. Your detentions will also encompass weekends. You will serve a detention of two hours per class day and four hours per weekend day, starting tomorrow. Is this clear?"

Harry realised that there was a distinct twinkle in the Headmaster's eyes, almost as if he was enjoying the show unfolding. Apparently Umbridge herself had arrived during the disciplinary chastisement, and the woman was alternating between some type of righteous rage or gloating glee at the fate assigned to Harry. Looking the Headmaster in the eyes, Harry gave the only response he could in a clear voice that carried through the hall. "Perfectly, sir."

Dumbledore nodded as he and Cyril moved to the Head Table and seated themselves. Harry sank back into his seat and slowly exhaled. Fred and George whistled softly at him, shaking their heads. Harry chanced to see the expression on Snape's face, which was unmitigated pleasure at the prospect of a servile Harry at his disposal for an entire month. Catching where Harry was looking, Fred leaned over and asked the obvious. "What's with the entrance, eh?"

Harry shook his head. "It's not the entrance. It's the setup. Be early for lunch." Taking a moment to look around while he picked over his bacon, he realised that Dumbledore had acted mostly as Harry expected. His announcement sent a clear message to all that Harry's actions were not being allowed to go unpunished, although Harry knew that in reality, expulsion would have been a more appropriate course of disciplinary action. Harry snorted inwardly. As if he cared whether or not he stayed at Hogwarts.

George coughed briefly before turning to Harry. "Dumbledore addressed the school last night, Harry. He had to quell the 'attempted murder' rubbish with Umbridge and the Aurors, and then he explained

that on Sunday you were only defending yourself from an unprovoked attack.”

George shook his head for a moment. “Frankly, it didn’t help much. I think if it hadn’t been for that fracas on Sunday, you’d be doing well enough, maybe you’d even be liked by the others. Except for the Snakes, of course.”

Fred nodded in agreement. The twins had no problems handing off bits of the conversation to each other, apparently. “As it is, well, ‘Dark Lord in Training’ seems about the nicest label people are using for you. That Prophet thing really didn’t do you any favours.”

Harry shook his head in frustration. He was ordered to make nice-nice with these people? Somehow, he would have to find a way to turn that image around, although Harry had serious reservations that his current company would help with that. As Harry slowly finished off his second breakfast of mostly bacon, rolls, and fruit, he surveyed the ever-expanding crowd in the hall. The Gryffindors continued to treat Harry’s presence as anathema, leaving a wide berth around where he sat with the twins and studiously avoiding even glancing at their end of the table.

Harry saw Neville enter with Ron, Hermione and Ginny, but only Neville would meet Harry’s gaze as they took seats in the midst of the Gryffindor pack. Harry nodded briefly in salute to the one person that was willing to buck the trend. The other students in the hall would furtively look his way, but the conversations were never such that he could make out the topic. He was certain, however, that the public announcement of his punishment would be common knowledge before the end of breakfast.

His contemplations were interrupted by the arrival of the morning post. Harry watched with veiled amusement as the horde of owls descended upon the student masses, since it forced them to stop covertly watching him or risk wearing their breakfasts to lessons. Next to him, Fred received a copy of the morning paper from a school owl, while George ignored the commotion. Fred simply sighed as he unrolled the paper and threw it on the table surface before tapping it with his finger. “You’ve got a real fan out there, Harry.” The smirk



could be felt plainly from his tone, so Harry had no need to look at either twin's face as he scanned the article.

Boy Who Lived Attacks Professor!

Near-death experience dismissed by Dumbledore!

by Rita Skeeter

In a further development of the violent and unexplained re-appearance of Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived attacked a Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry without provocation. The new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, Dolores Umbridge, coincidentally also the Senior Undersecretary to Minister for Magic Fudge, was in mid-lecture when she was viciously attacked without warning and left wounded in front of a classroom full of horrified witnesses.

Despite Professor Umbridge's attempts to press charges on the possibly mentally disturbed Potter, Headmaster Albus Dumbledore wrote the incident off as a misunderstanding and merely stated that, "Mr Potter will receive suitable punishment within the school rules for breaking the school rules."

When Minister Fudge himself attempted to make Dumbledore see reason regarding the dangers of harbouring a student as violent and blood-thirsty as Potter appears to be, the Headmaster and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot claimed that there was no problem and that everything was fine.

The handling of Potter when combined with Dumbledore's recent inflammatory comments this past weekend to the English Wizengamot has led to questions being raised as to Dumbledore's continued fitness for leading the Wizengamot. Dumbledore is apparently suggesting that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has regained a body and is now back among us, despite the common knowledge that he was killed by his own curse failing years ago, leaving us with the shadowy Boy-Who-Lived.

Minister Fudge is rumoured to be personally overseeing the sensitive investigation looking into matters regarding Potter, Dumbledore, and the so-called return of the Dark Lord due to the volatility and status of those involved.

More troubling, perhaps, are the lingering issues and stories that speculate that Potter has become or is now turning Dark. Not only did he survive the Darkest curse known, the Killing Curse, as an infant for inexplicable reasons, his own actions over the past week raise serious doubts about his intentions.

With Dumbledore claiming the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named at the same time as Harry Potter rejoins us as a seemingly unstable, murderous, and vicious wizard, the obvious connections and implications that perhaps the Dark Lord rising is none other than Harry Potter must be examined.

Dumbledore's failure to address the dangers of having Potter at Hogwarts where he can recruit his own secret followers (continued, Page 3.)

As Harry finished the top-fold story, he was incapable of stopping his snort of derision from escaping. "Right," he muttered at Fred and George while rolling his eyes. "I'm the next Dark Lord, and you two are my trusted lieutenants. Do go out and fetch me some Muggles for a spot of torture 'round tea time, won't you?"

Fred spit his juice across the table and started coughing while George just stared at Harry with faint admiration. "Sir, yes, sir! Sir, would that be three or four Muggles, sir?!"

Harry made a show of considering things. "Four, I think. You can each have one, but since I'm clearly the Dark Lord here, I must have more than any followers. So be sharp about it, right? No scraggly ones for us, we want some decent, well-fed ones with a good bit of fight in them."

Fred was wiping his face with a napkin while George saluted Harry with a banger. "Sir!" he agreed emphatically. As the three started laughing quietly over the byplay, most conversations in the hall were

focused on the recently delivered Prophet. Students everywhere were hunched over their own copies of the paper or that of a neighbouring student. What should probably have been the occasional furtive glance was so frequent that Harry wondered if the magical world would have methods available to cure self-induced whiplash en masse.

Harry scanned the Head Table, noting in passing that Snape was once again looking like the proverbial cat that ate the canary. Or rather, given the man's disposition, the snake that ate the field mouse. As Harry locked his eyes with Cyril, who was calmly eating next to Dumbledore, he inclined his head toward Snape in a vague gesture. Cyril merely raised one eyebrow in response and continued eating. After a few moments, the older man spoke something so quietly that Dumbledore had to lean over toward Cyril. As Dumbledore straightened, he unobtrusively scanned the hall before glancing at his own staff. Frowning, Dumbledore turned back to Harry, and the twinkle in his eyes died.

Clearing his throat, Dumbledore rose to his feet and tapped repeatedly on his goblet for everyone's attention. As the students focused on the Headmaster, Dumbledore surveyed his staff again before shaking his head slightly.

"Thank you all for your attention. While I normally loathe announcing changes during the term, recent events have made it clear to me that some of my staff are quite overworked. By his own admission, our dear Potions professor is hard pressed to manage his many duties." As the Headmaster paused for a moment, Harry was curious where this was going, while Snape was suddenly looking very unsure of himself.

"It is with sadness that I must therefore announce that Professor Snape will no longer be the Head of Slytherin House. I had hoped to delay this, but his heavy burden requires me to act promptly."

Pausing to let the murmurs quieten, Dumbledore surveyed the students. Harry noted that Dumbledore's gaze lingered on those students unable to stop themselves from expressing dismay or anger

at the development. "Due to this change, his own classes will no longer be held in the dungeons, but they will be exchanged with the classroom of the new Head of Slytherin House. In her years at Hogwarts as a student fifty years ago, she was a model Slytherin, using her skills and House ideals to further her career goals most admirably. She has continued her practical use of those skills as faculty for the past sixteen years."

Dumbledore paused once more to gaze upon the Slytherin students, going so far as to adjust his body to solely face that table. "It is with pleasure that I now introduce you to your new Head of House – Professor Sybill Trelawney."

The absolute silence that was the only impact upon the Great Hall was impressive to Harry. Having been on the receiving end of the "cone of silence", as he liked to think of it, he realised now that he had never had complete silence as a reward for his actions. This announcement had not only stilled all conversation, it had stilled all movement, perhaps even all breathing, and not even the few remaining owls were moving. As Dumbledore surveyed the students once again, Harry wanted to laugh himself sick at the pale and horrified expression on Snape's face.

Without warning, Fred and George shot to their feet and began applauding loudly with the occasional cat call of approval. As though this was the one signal everyone else needed, the entirety of the Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuffs tables stood and applauded loudly. The only ones that seemed less than pleased by the announcements were the Slytherins. Unsure of the dynamic that had suddenly transpired, Harry merely stood and applauded politely with the others who were much more enthusiastic. He would have to find out more about this new professor later.

As the noise died down, Dumbledore raised his hands once again to gather silence. "Yes, yes, I'm sure you will all congratulate Professor Trelawney later. Right now, the house-elves are moving all of the Potions classroom materials to the North Tower and all of the Divination materials into the dungeons. With the change in status, there will also be a change in housing, as Professor Snape will no longer need to be near the Slytherin common room. He will now

reside in the North Tower by his new classroom, while Professor Trelawney will move into the suite outside of the Slytherin common room. Please, return to your breakfasts and remember the locations of the new classrooms. No one shall be penalised for being late to either class this week as we all adjust to this minor change.”

As Dumbledore sat down with a grand gesture of grace, Fred and George began gleefully telling stories of Professor Trelawney to Harry. Harry listened with one ear in mild amusement at the stories of the apparently batty old Divination instructor and felt a flicker of something that almost was sympathy for the Slytherin students. Whatever sense of pride they may have had would now be crushed. But then again, Harry was less than fond of most Slytherins he had met, so perhaps the change would do a world of good for the next generations.

As the Great Hall settled into a flurry of conversations, most likely consisting of older students explaining to younger ones about the new Head of House much like Fred and George were doing for Harry, Cyril rose from the Staff Table and headed toward Harry. Fred and George slowly trailed off as Cyril came and sat opposite Harry.

Harry inclined his head once, respectfully, and then waited.

I was less than pleased to find you had left for the evening and I had no way to reach you. The thought was clearly projected past Harry's Occlumency shields.

Harry nodded briefly in return, ignoring the frowns coming from Fred and George. Harry was hard-pressed to squelch his own surprise at Cyril's ability to project directly into his highly shielded mind. Narrowing his concentration in order to control the projection of Legilimency required for this type of communication, Harry carefully constructed his reply thoughts. Dumbledore told me that I should spend the evening with my family. I should have left a message for you, since he told me you would be arriving yesterday. Harry paused for a moment. I apologise.

Cyril waved his hand in a vague manner. No matter. It has been some years since Albus and I have sat and talked freely, so we took

advantage of the evening after he was done chatting with your Severus Snape.

Harry bristled slightly at the tone. He's not my Snape. If he were, he'd be shackled appropriately.

Cyril smirked, something Harry had never seen before. Oh, he's yours now, Harry. Never fool yourself about that. Whether you like it or not, he owns you as you own him.

Harry frowned hard at Cyril before shaking his head. I don't see it that way. He is in a bed of his own making.

Cyril merely smiled in response. He who controls a thing, Harry, owns that thing. We shall talk more later, I believe. For now, I will be roaming about and reacquainting myself with this castle. I shall see you this evening, after your meeting with Albus.

With nothing more than that, Cyril stood up and disappeared with a soft pop! While Fred and George gaped at the spot Cyril had been in, Harry frowned and concentrated. Try as he might, there was no magical energy radiating from the space Cyril had been in that he could discern. Despite the fact that it really was supposed to be impossible to Apparate in Hogwarts, Cyril seemed to have done it. Or else the old man was being sneaky and using a Portkey coupled with a masking sound spell to mimic the distinctive Apparition noise. Harry would have to determine how that trick was accomplished later.

George nudged Harry in the ribs briefly. "What is it with you types? You randomly feel like breaking the rules of magic around here?"

Fred nodded quickly. "Where can we learn to break through the Apparition wards?"

Harry shook his head briefly. "You can't Apparate in Hogwarts, boys, everyone knows that."

As Fred groaned, George began chuckling. "Well, then, Harry, you're about to wish you could." He pointed at a grey ball of feathers flying in

a drunken pattern but with an overall trend of aiming right for the triumvirate of trouble. As the owl approached, Harry immediately became conscious of two things. First, it was a very old owl that looked ready to die on the next beat of its wings. Second, it was carrying a Howler, which was beginning to shake somewhat in the owl's grip, or perhaps the owl simply had a slight palsy.

George looked at Harry with mock sorrow. "Looks like our mum has decided to give you a bit of her mind, probably over Ginny and that article yesterday. Better run for it."

Harry shook his head and cleared away the dishes in front of him. As soon as the owl dropped the Howler, Harry tossed it into the air before flicking a wand into each hand. With two quick wrist snaps, twin spheres appeared around the now-glowing Howler, one ever so slightly smaller than the other and fully inside the larger one. "Watch," Harry commented as he concentrated on the spheres. With a drawing motion in his left hand, the inner sphere shrank to a quarter of its volume, and with a pushing motion from his right hand, the outer sphere tripled in volume. The owl, meanwhile, dropped like a stone, sending bits of egg and toast flying as it landed and lay limp in the middle of George's plate.

Nearly every eye in the hall was riveted on the glowing balls hovering above the table. Harry casually put his wands back into his sleeves, grabbed his goblet, and enjoyed the cool pumpkin juice. As the Howler exploded and only the very faintest of buzzing sounds could be heard, Fred's and George's faces exhibited unmitigated awe. "No way!" Fred breathed. "You can silence a Howler?!"

Harry shrugged. "No, magically they are protected from silencing. But you can contain them so that they don't make any noise." Harry noted in passing that the Howler burst into flames, but due to the limited atmosphere in the inner bubble, it rapidly turned into a partially burned but fully carbonised parchment. Flicking his wand at each sphere with a concentrated *Finite Incantatem!*, the parchment slowly fell to the table while most people in the hall were staring at him again.

"Wow," George said, picking up the parchment. "Was that a Bubble-Head Charm you used?"

Harry nodded.

Fred crumbled the edge of the parchment, watching in apparent fascination as little flakes fell to the table. "I didn't know you could change their size." Glancing up, Harry watched Fred scan the table and then stop, looking at one person, before Harry also noticed how angry Ron looked further down the table. "Er, Harry," the redhead offered with a grin, "I do believe our mum is going to hear about this. You probably should have taken the Howler."

Harry shook his head in response. "Nope. I refuse to accept Howlers. I can't understand why anyone puts up with them. After my first one, I took the time to learn how to handle them. I can't believe you guys haven't yet."

Fred dropped the remnants of the Howler and glanced around. "Well, my master and Dark Lord, you sure know how to draw the crowd. It's like they expect you to put on a show for them."

George nodded as he also seemed to admire being the centre of attention in the Great Hall. "Quite. Perhaps you're not being Dark enough this morning. Need some help there putting on a proper show? Slashing up some toast, maybe?"

Fred leaned closer. "Stabbing some eggs? Violating the jam?"

George smirked. "Butchering the bacon? Hanging the strudel?"

Harry laughed quietly at the antics of the twins. "Right," he agreed. Glancing at his watch, he sighed for a moment. "Well, it's been fun, but it's time for class. Later, gents."

As Harry began heading off to Charms with Professor Flitwick, Fred and George rose to fall in stride with him. "Really, Harry, you don't think you can leave your loyal followers like that, now do you? We have to follow you. It's in the job title, right?" George asked.

Fred simply walked as closely behind Harry as he could manage.



“Don’t the two of you have classes or the like?” Harry asked a bit plaintively as Fred kept trodding on the backs of his feet. Somehow Harry doubted that it was accidentally happening on every step he took.

Fred chirped up from behind him. “Course we do. Transfiguration, right next to the Charms classroom. Where are you headed?”

Harry simply sighed loudly in resignation. “I’ll be Charmed.”

After much jostling and continued harassment from his self-titled followers, Harry gratefully entered the Charms classroom and took a seat near the middle but on the far right edge. Pulling out his Muggle exercise book and text, he leaned back in the seat and waited for others to arrive. Given the dubious reactions he was still likely to encounter, he thought it best to arrive early and let the other students decide how close they wanted to sit to him. His schedule said that this class would be with the Ravenclaws, and he was curious to see how that group of students would react to him.

Harry was mildly surprised when Neville arrived only a minute or two after Harry and proceeded to drop into the vacant seat next to him. With a quick nod as a silent ‘hello’, Neville dropped his bag and pulled out the Charms text along with parchment, quill, and ink. Once Neville was situated, he glanced at Harry, and then the boy rolled his shoulders and started reading the text.

While Harry was trying to puzzle out the mystery that was Neville, other students began filing in. Most sat far away from Harry, but it was evident that sooner or later the lack of copious free tables would force students into his proximity. The simultaneous arrival of Hermione, Ron, and Ginny became an interesting moment.

Ginny moved to the empty chair behind Harry. Ron hustled to sit next to her and kept muttering under his breath. Her eyes narrowed, Hermione marched over and sat with a rather attractive bloke wearing Ravenclaw colours two tables away. This only seemed to make Ron mutter more, but whatever he was saying was lost between his lack of enunciation and the general rustle and bustle of students preparing for class.

Harry tried to make a conscious effort to smile at whomever looked his way, but this mostly caused them to rapidly spin back to whatever they had been doing before furtively looking at him. After one rather abrupt spin which caused a boy's ink pot to smash on the ground, Neville leaned over to provide a word of caution. "Er, your smile isn't right, Harry."

Harry felt overwhelming confusion. "What do you mean, it isn't right? How can a smile be wrong?"

Neville looked mildly sorrowful to be the bearer of bad news. "Well, it sort of feels like a wolf smiling at sheep, if you know what I mean." Neville smiled weakly at Harry, but Harry shook his head in resignation.

"Play 'nice-nice'," Harry muttered darkly, while Neville looked more nervous. "I'll show them how to play 'nice-nice'..."

"Attention!" Harry glanced around in mid-rant, mildly surprised to see the rather short Professor Flitwick standing on top of a pile of books in a chair, waving his hands with excitement. "Let's get started!"

The next fifteen minutes were excruciating to Harry. He was convinced that every professor had some pat speech they would give at the beginning of each O.W.L. class or final N.E.W.T.-year class, and they had all been delivered so many times that each one was as exciting as watching the paint peel, perhaps on a wall that had been painted mere moments before – in a room devoid of anything but fresh paint and walls.

When Flitwick finally announced that they were to review the Summoning Charm, most students turned to their partners and began talking over who was going to do what and when, in order to minimise accidents. Before Harry could talk about procedure with Neville, however, the diminutive Flitwick scurried to their table.

“Mr Potter!” he called to get their attention. “I have been led to understand you know magic appropriate for this year group, perhaps even somewhat ahead of them. Would you please demonstrate this charm for me?”

Harry shrugged, flicked his wand out, drew a few motions in the air, and silently Summoned the chair that Flitwick had been standing on, books included. Neville paled before dropping to the floor, but Harry changed the motion as the objects began arriving, holding them all in place in the air. Once they were all reasonably close to how they had been, with the books stacked on each other on the chair, he let the whole collection fall to the floor with a bit of bang.

“Impressive! Excellent work, five points to... err... Gryffindor, then, is it?”

Harry nodded slightly, aware that most students were again staring at him. “Gryffindor for today, at any rate, Professor.”

Flitwick nodded briefly. “Very good, please continue to practice and perhaps help anyone that needs a bit of assistance, would you?” Flitwick moved off to another table before Harry could even reply.

As Neville slowly got back into his seat, Harry smiled faintly at his partner. “Care to demonstrate your Summoning Charm?”

Neville had no problem with the Charm, but he was only summoning the top book from the stack in the chair Harry had brought over. “Er, Harry, how did you stop those from hitting us?”

Harry winked slowly and spoke in a voice a little too loud for quiet partner level work. “I just switched the charm from Accio to the old Wingardium, Neville. Rather trivial once you try it.” Harry glanced over to Hermione, who was staring at him with a spark of fire in her eyes. Before he could realise the depth of his mistake, she had a roll of parchment on the table and was furiously scribbling down something. Harry would almost swear that it was the same parchment she had her list of Pester-Harry-About questions on.

Neville, seeing where Harry was looking, started chuckling openly. "Didn't expect that, did you?"

Sighing, Harry gave up with a shrug of his shoulders. Most of the other students were back to doing their own work, but he was still getting random glances. Deciding it was time to put on a bit of a show since he was being stared at anyway, Harry began a rapid alternation between silent Summoning and Banishing Charms, moving Neville's corked ink pot in a mental game of tennis against an invisible opponent.

At first, this again caused all work in the room to stop. As students quickly realised that Harry was randomly firing an ink pot around the room at high speed, alternately shooting it away from him and then rocketing it back to him, people started ducking. Flitwick, however, came to Harry's side and began applauding enthusiastically. This caused most students to calm down somewhat, but they still flinched whenever the pot got close to them.

After a few minutes of boredom with the ink pot, Harry dropped it back onto the desk in front of Neville. Neville smiled weakly back at Harry before slowly putting the pot back in his bag. Ron's muttering reached new heights, and he finally was audible enough for Harry to make out the phrase "show-off" at least twice in one sentence.

Turning slightly, Harry smiled broadly at the gangly red-head. "What's the matter, Ron? Can't do a simple Summoning Charm? Need some help?"

Ron flushed dark red before glaring back at Harry. "I don't need any help! Of course I can do a stupid Summoning Charm!"

"Oh?" Harry smirked. "Prove it, but not on something wimpy like that quill you've been using. The door's barely closed. Why don't you Summon the handle, and the door should pop open if you actually can do it right?" Harry spent considerable effort lacing his tone with the sarcastic expression of Ron's imminent failure.

Ron huffed a time or two before sharply calling out, "Accio Handle!" Harry thought it was completely too easy. Before Ron could realise

what went wrong, he was jerked into the table he was sharing with Ginny, and his wand flew from his hand across the room to smack into the door handle.

As Ron sank back into his chair, wheezing slightly, Harry could swear he heard giggling coming from the direction of Hermione. “Really, Ron, how thick are you? Haven’t you heard of that crazy Squib, Isaac Newton, who lived back in the late 1600’s?”

Ron moaned somewhat as he rubbed his ribs. “Why should I care about some Squib?”

Harry clucked his tongue in false sorrow. “Children these days. Mr Newton came up with the first workable model of gravity. You do know what gravity is, right?” Ron only nodded sullenly. “Well, Mr Newton was a bit odd. I mean really, how odd do you have to be to poke a stick into your eye and wiggle it around to see how the colours change with where the stick moves...” As Ron paled to match Neville, Harry saw Ginny fighting a smirk.

“ Anyway, Ron, Mr Newton came up with this crazy idea. He basically said that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. So you, maybe twelve or thirteen stone of thick-witted student, just tried to Summon a reinforced door in a block wall. Instead of pulling the door to you, you all but Summoned yourself to the door. A perfect display of Newton’s Third Law of Motion.”

Harry waved his wand theatrically for a moment, before the door swung lazily open. “It’s not the force you use, Ron, but how you use it.” Ron looked nothing short of bewildered. With a sigh, Harry turned back into his seat and slumped down to stare at the ceiling. It was going to be a long and slow class.

Harry surmised that Transfiguration with the Hufflepuffs would be a similar experience in tedium – albeit hopefully one with less assignments. The Weasley twins apparently had an inverted schedule from Harry, and quite a bit of jostling took place between his dubious followers and their master as they moved into Charms and he moved into Transfiguration. While Hermione had made a point of smiling and saying hello to Harry and Neville as she took the table

directly in front of them this time, no one else seemed willing to sit near Harry. Neville looked somewhat sad that Hannah was still avoiding him, and when Harry suggested that Neville might want to go sit with her instead, the boy simply told Harry that it was probably for the best anyway. Harry knew he was dreadful at deciphering relationships, so he opted to let it slide. Maybe Sirius could explain it to him later.

After delivering another rote lecture on O.W.L. importance, expectations, and study habits, Professor McGonagall launched into a discourse on the complexity of Vanishing Spells. Harry was mildly interested to hear her talk about the lesson, as he had yet to try the Vanishing family of magic. He was slightly disappointed that she skipped the theory behind how the spells would work, but he supposed that the text would have such information if he was lucky.

While the rest of the class settled down to immediately begin attempting the spell, Harry pulled out the text and tried to study the section on the Vanishing spell for a few minutes. The sound of a throat clearing caused him to look up at the stern Professor McGonagall, who was frowning at him. "Mr Potter, would you please tell me why you are not practicing this spell?" Her tone was far from warm, but it held no implications that she was angry either.

"I'm trying to determine the theory behind how the spell works, Professor," Harry replied as politely as he could.

"Oh? Was my explanation lacking?" Her tone had become decidedly cooler.

Harry felt a moment of quandary over the situation. Should he admit the truth, or find a nice-nice way to lie? "Well," he temporised, "I'm used to thinking about the energy mixes and motions, not the particular words of an incantation. You gave a great discussion of the mechanics, but I was hoping to find more on the abstract side." He tried to keep his tone pleasant and a smile on his face, but Neville's warning that his smile was completely wrong made him even more concerned over how to deal with the professor.

McGonagall, if anything, stood more erect, and her arms folded sharply across her abdomen. "Really, Mr Potter. And precisely what have you found?"

Harry knew he was in trouble, but he was less than sure precisely how deep the trouble was. "Well, so far, this book doesn't explore the theory at all. It's all mechanics. That's why I keep flipping through different sections. I think the author missed the point of writing a textbook."

The silence between the professor and Harry began to stretch out, and Harry had the uncomfortable sensation that he was being prepared for slaughter. Most of the students around them were watching warily, except Hermione, who was once again writing vigorously on her parchment. Harry noticed in passing that she was now writing on the opposite side of the scroll.

Finally, McGonagall strode to the front of the room, extracting a book from the small collection neatly stored there. Returning to Harry's table, she gently placed the text in front of him. "Mr Potter," she said, her tone still somewhat near freezing, "the Headmaster informed me you might find the text lacking in some ways. I am offering you this as supplementary reading material. You are to take extremely good care of it, do you understand?"

Harry nodded slowly, trying to ignore the bead of sweat rolling down his temple from the strain he felt. He was sure that if he ever needed to learn how to completely cow someone with a glance and tone, this was the woman to come to for lessons. McGonagall gave him a sharp nod before turning and moving off to the next table to investigate why their snail had grown a second shell instead of losing parts as the Vanishing Spell should have done. The end of the class saw another behemoth essay handed out with casual indifference from the stern professor. All in all, Harry thought he might like Professor Flitwick's demeanour better, but he was forced to admit that with the book McGonagall gave him, he would learn far more in Transfiguration at this rate.

As soon as McGonagall dismissed the students, Harry strode to the exit and reached into his bag. In one swift motion as he approached

the first staircase, Harry leapt over the railing and swept his Firebolt under him as he shot off like a rocket to the Great Hall. Harry bypassed the students standing around waiting for staircases to align properly and flew over the heads of those students already in the halls. As he reached the Great Hall, he was pleased to see the doors standing open, and he flew directly in toward the Gryffindor table.

Harry's use of his broom to get to the Great Hall had led to many shouts and surprised faces, but he was surprised himself to find Fred and George had beat him to their end of the Gryffindor table. Flying straight to his seat before dropping into it and pushing his broom back into his special case, Harry squinted at the twins. "Now how did you get here before I did? Charms is right next to Transfiguration!"

Fred winked. "Simple, old bean. But what's that you called it?" Fred paused to tap his chin thoughtfully.

George snapped his fingers and looked triumphant. "That's right. 'Trade Secret', Harry, so terribly sorry."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, yeah, all that rot. Point made." More students were filing into the Great Hall, and Harry was gradually realising that no matter what he did, his schoolmates were going to stare at him. He made a mental note that it was worth some time to consider ways to actually deserve the fishbowl treatment, but he had to concede that most people did not travel the corridors by broom. That in and of itself was a bit of a mystery, since he thought the idea of waiting for a staircase to feel like being useful was far more ludicrous than simply flying from room to room.

Professor McGonagall entered the Great Hall and stalked over to stand in front of Harry. "Mr Potter," she said in perfectly clipped tones, her eyes flashing, "did you or did you not hear the announcement that there is to be no use of magic in the corridors between classes?"

Surprised, Harry looked at his temporary Head of House. "Of course I did."



She leaned forward slightly before tapping the table as a syllabic cadence with each word she spoke. "Then explain your use of that broom to get here!"

Harry smiled benignly. "Well, Professor, the rules say we aren't to use spells, but Mr Filch asked for the Headmaster to say we aren't to use magic. He was incorrect, you see, so I did nothing wrong." Harry leaned back slightly as McGonagall continued her tapping of the table top.

After a long moment of watching Harry, she collected her hands as she folded her arms. "I shall look into these rules, Mr Potter. We shall speak again about this." She gracefully turned and strode away. Harry was uncertain, but he thought he saw a faint twitch of her lips as she left.

As she was moving toward the head table, however, Professor Snape came striding into the Great Hall. Having planted the seeds earlier, Harry turned a thoughtful gaze on the professor. Fred and George rapidly locked their eyes on the professor as well. Most of the other students realised that the three Gryffindors were staring at Snape, so they too began to watch the man as he entered. As Snape continued his patent march, causing his cloak to billow behind him in a tangible aura of malice, Harry saw the back corner twitch slightly. "Perfect!" he whispered. Harry began softly counting. "3... 2... 1... Now!"

With each count, Snape's cloak billowed even higher, and when Harry reached number one, it was almost horizontal and ruffling gently. Snape appeared unaware of the situation, but he started scowling harder and walking faster, realising that many students were staring at him for no apparent reason. Before he could pause to interrogate someone, his cloak shot around his body, perfectly mummifying his arms and legs. The next thing everyone witnessed was an immobilised Snape falling on his face, and – with no ability to catch himself – he smashed his nose into the floor. As soon as he hit the floor, his cloak flared up, relaxed, and reverted to normal, quickly covering him like a sheet over a corpse.

At that moment, Harry barely resisted the urge to laugh his head off as Dumbledore and Cyril strolled into the Great Hall, talking to each

other. Dumbledore paused and paled slightly at the sight of a body under a cloak in the middle of the floor, while the students were staring at the body with a mixture of horror and something akin to constipation. McGonagall was frozen in a half-sitting, half-standing posture by her seat at the Head Table. In the longest instant of record, the Great Hall was silent. Finally, a first-year Ravenclaw cracked and started laughing outright.

Before anyone else could react, Snape shot to his feet and glared at all and sundry in the room. His scowling expression was marred by the blood freely flowing from his obviously broken nose. This set off a rapid chain reaction as dozens of students slowly gave in and started laughing, although most were still making Herculean efforts to mask it by laughing into their hands or turning around in their seats.

When Snape saw Dumbledore and Cyril behind him, he glared at them just as hard. Pulling out his wand, he loudly cast “Finite Incantatem!” several times upon his cloak before returning to his survey of the students. Harry was working hard on maintaining an expressionless face, and the twins next to him were clearly professionals at this routine. When Snape finally settled his gaze on the twins and Harry, his narrowed eyes were the only suggestion that the man was up to something before a scream rent the air.

“RAPE! HELP! MIND-RAPE! SOMEONE IS RAPING MY MIND! BUGGER OFF, YOU’VE NO RIGHT!”

The screaming then began repeating itself after doubling in volume, while Fred began glowing with a nimbus of bright azure light. Snape paled partially through the second iteration and finally looked away, silencing the screams echoing in the hall but leaving frustration evident on his face. Dumbledore was frowning at Snape, and Cyril was simply staring impassively at the man. Every student was staring at either Snape, the Headmaster, or Fred.

Before Dumbledore could say anything, Snape stalked over to Fred and George. “Your wands!” he demanded in a hiss. Fred and George were grinning madly as they handed theirs over. “You too, Potter!” Snape demanded. Harry yawned with indifference at the man as he handed over both of his wands.

Snape proceeded to test each wand but only found Charms work on each of the twins' wands and Transfiguration class work on each of Harry's. With a growl of frustration, Snape stared again at Fred before turning to George. Handing George back his wand, Snape narrowed his eyes sharply as George looked up to receive his wand. Without warning, the screams of "RAPE! HELP! MIND-RAPE! SOMEONE IS—" started up again, while George began glowing a bright azure colour. Looking away in clear frustration, Snape threw the other wands on the table and marched back over to the Headmaster, where he was joined by Umbridge.

Dumbledore, Cyril, Umbridge and Snape proceeded to leave the hall in the midst of an argument. Snape followed the other three and argued the whole way out that somehow one of those Gryffindors assaulted him and he wanted to find out which one it was. Right before he reached the doors, his cape flared up and assumed a shape that looked like it stepped straight out of a Mr Universe muscle-man competition.

As a few snorts of laughter rang out once more, Snape whirled in place, his cloak immediately dropping back into the aspect of a normal billowing cloak and slowly settling as he stopped walking. Glaring at the students who were now again unsuccessfully trying to stifle their laughter, Snape whirled once more and left the Great Hall, his cloak now making shadow puppet figures randomly.

Fred and George both enthusiastically clapped Harry on the shoulders. "Brilliant, Harry, simply brilliant!" Fred's voice carried overtones of admiration. "We've been trying to prank him since we got here, and he always either catches us before we can or proves it was us after we do. We've never pulled one off on him without some punishment!"

George was smiling broadly. "I wish I could have a picture of that. It would be perfect."

Harry smiled in response. "Glad you liked the little show." Looking at the ceiling in thought, Harry reflected on how the spell was

constructed. "I wonder how long it will take him to catch on now that it's in the second phase of operation."

Fred's face became suddenly thoughtful as he stared at Harry. "You know," he mentioned casually, "that grace period has been over for two days now..." Fred let his voice trail off significantly.

Harry grinned back while George and Fred began grinning in turn. "So it has," Harry said amicably. "So it has."

Before any further discussion could take place, Hermione dropped into the seat across from Harry and next to Fred. Neville sat next to her. "Hello, Harry," she said in a firm voice. The effect of her determination was spoiled somewhat as she shot glances further down the table, where Ron was scowling at her and arguing with Ginny over something.

"Hermione," Harry returned calmly.

Hermione smiled at him in an exaggerated fashion. "How are you, Harry?" she asked brightly.

Harry merely raised one eyebrow at her as Neville slowly shook his head behind her back.

To her credit, Hermione managed to suppress the flush to her skin almost before it happened. "Er, well, I guess that was a silly question. I think you're being treated poorly, Harry. I'll admit to being unsure at first, but after Dumbledore explained things, I don't see why everyone is still expecting you to become violent."

Fred clapped her on the shoulder, grinning maliciously. "Maybe because he's our new Dark Lord and Master?" George hunched his shoulders slightly and took on a vacant expression as he slowly nodded his head in agreement.

Neville choked on the sandwich he had only begun eating, while Hermione giggled slightly. "Right," she said, rolling her eyes. "I'm convinced." Hermione began methodically putting her lunch together with the same precision that Harry had observed in her breakfast

eating habits previously, choosing the salad, roast chicken, and trimmings rather than the sandwich options.

“I want to talk to you, Harry,” Hermione said as she assembled her lunch.

oOo oOo oOo

A/N:

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to Chreechree and cwarbeck. Thanks to random folks for lending their Brit-picking data, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

For the record – yes, that’s a true story about that crazy man, Mr Isaac Newton, and the stick he put onto his eye. See the fun text *Journey Through Genius*, by William Dunham.

You may have recognized one line in particular as inspired by Frank Herbert.

And last, about nice-nice: This slang term in the States apparently has no equivalent in England. Sirius and Remus telling Harry to ‘make nice-nice’ with the other people at Hogwarts is essentially ‘be friendly’ but with a lot more context/connotation. There’s a weak bit of a kissing-up aspect, but it’s really more that it implies that you were less than nice to begin with, are being forced or coerced into changing, and it’s slightly sarcastic/condescending/patronising ... perhaps also along the lines of ‘masquerade sufficiently to blend into another group you really don’t fit well with’ or ‘do what it takes to fit in and get along.’

## Chapter 13: Reflections

Harry had the sudden urge to crawl under the table, but Hermione would never let him escape so easily. By deliberately baiting her during Charms, he had hoped to nudge her beyond the basics and push her to try something that would lead to new insight in magical theory. Unfortunately, his display had probably just added another hundred questions to her mounting list.

“First, Harry,” the brunette started, “you’ll be at Potions Tutoring today, right?”

Harry smiled. “Of course I will. I know that while you will be tutoring all of us, Dumbledore arranged this so you could specifically tutor me. Thank you for that, Hermione.”

Hermione smiled brightly back at him. “You’re welcome, Harry.” She seemed incredibly pleased to be appreciated for what she could offer in the way of knowledge.

George leaned over. “Barmy, this one. She’d lecture a troll if she thought it might learn anything,” he whispered loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Harry chuckled. “No worries. Hermione reminds me of someone I admire very much. They seem like they might be kindred spirits.”

Hermione’s eyes lit up. “Really? Who?”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe I’ll tell you later.”

Hermione looked disappointed at being denied a prospective intellectual to converse with, but she regained her cheery demeanour quickly enough. Harry flicked his eyes down the table to see Ron glaring at him. Ginny was talking to one of the Quidditch players. Harry was having a hard time remembering their names but thought she might be Katie.

As he was looking around, Dumbledore and Cyril walked back into the Great Hall. Harry was curious where Snape and Umbridge had

gone, but it was clear that they would not be returning with the Headmaster. Shrugging it off as a mystery to be explored later, he turned his attention back to Hermione, who already had her scroll of questions pinned to the table. She had a quill in one hand and a fork in the other.

“Ready, Harry?” she asked with enough enthusiasm to make Harry wish lightning would strike him down immediately.

“Go ahead,” he replied with some trepidation as she took a dainty bite of her lunch. Her expression was decidedly hungry, but Harry was unclear whether it was for food or information.

Over the next thirty minutes, Hermione bombarded Harry with a series of questions about the principles behind magic that he answered in half-riddles and vague hints. She obsessed over how Harry could convert an Accio in mid-flight into some other spell. Since she kept reminding him not to just give her the answers, he began to take a perverse pleasure in twisting her questions back upon themselves until the answer was hidden in plain sight. Hermione was dutifully taking notes of everything they discussed but seemed no closer to making the next step of intuitive connections that would lead her into the next enlightenment about words, thoughts, and magical energy.

Fred and George contributed to the conversation with often hysterical commentary, but Harry knew they were paying closer attention than it appeared. He was certain that once or twice Fred had written down a few cryptic words of an exchange to refer to later. Harry was unsure what exactly that would lead to, but with the earlier implicit reaffirmation of a prank war about to begin among the three of them, he was sure it would be interesting.

Neville, for his part, listened and asked a question or two but mostly tried to follow the topics without appearing too lost. Harry thought that with simply a significant boost of self-confidence, Neville might become a real force to be reckoned with. His quiet but insightful questions left Harry bemused; Neville, of all people, was the quintessential paradox: brave enough to confront Harry on behalf of

others but too cowardly to speak up for himself; clever enough to challenge Hermione when he put his mind to it but too uncertain to realise his own gifts. For all the sympathy he received from Neville, Harry was beginning to think that perhaps Neville needed it more than he did.

Shortly before the clock in the Great Hall announced the end of lunch, Hermione put away her materials and, with a quiet goodbye to the twins, walked out of the Great Hall with Harry and Neville.

Hermione led them into the same empty classroom where Harry had waited for the Sorting. They took a few moments to magically clean and reorganise the room. After she had enlarged the lone instructor's desk with a quick Engorgio! charm, everyone pulled out their texts and settled around the table. Harry grabbed a Muggle exercise book, while Hermione and Neville extracted their parchment notes.

"Very well," Hermione began, "since I'm supposed to be tutoring you, let's discuss how we'll do this."

Harry nodded his head at the door. "D'you want to wait for the others, or are they not showing?"

Hermione's excited expression fell slightly. "I'm sorry, Harry, but I don't think Ron or Ginny will be coming."

Neville looked sadly at him. Harry was reluctant to admit it, but he thought that Neville's facial expression was rather appropriate – he knew that winning friends and influencing people in a positive way was going to be difficult for him. Neville was clearly more perceptive than his appearance suggested.

Hermione shuffled some parchment slips before placing a stack of Muggle-style note cards made from clipped bits of parchment on the table. "These are my notes on Potions," she said. "I've been working to make sure it's all cross-referenced. The Potions textbook is the best source of information, really, as the class is more of a practical. I've found that in order to—"



Hermione stopped abruptly when arguing voices – a male and a female – were heard in the hallway. Based on the steadily increasing volume level, the bickering couple was approaching the room.

“– not like that!” With a flurry of motion, Ginny Weasley stormed through the partially open doorway, Ron hot on her heels. Shrugging her arm out of Ron’s grip, she headed for the table the others were sitting at. Apparently giving in to whatever inevitability was dictating Ginny’s actions, Ron literally ran in front of her and threw himself into the empty seat next to Harry and glared at his sister. Ginny showed no reaction beyond her already annoyed state as she took the only remaining empty seat, diametrically opposite Harry and as far from him as the table allowed.

As Ron sat panting slightly and glowering at everyone in general, Ginny calmly reached into her bag and extracted her materials. “Sorry I’m late, Hermione. I ran into a recurring problem on the way.”

Hermione gave her a small smile, one wary eye on a flushed and still glaring Ron. “Right, well, we were just getting started. Ron, are you going to be studying or not?”

Ron shot her a dark look before he sullenly pulled his text and materials out of his bag. Somehow Ron managed to make a complete production out of placing his things on the desk as he continued to stare balefully at his sister. He ignored Harry completely.

Sighing, Hermione extracted her wand neatly from her robes and flicked it at the door to close it. Looking back at Harry, she tried again for the bright and energetic look that he had occasionally seen, but it fell flat. “As I was saying, I’ve got these notes I’ve been working on since first year, and–”

She was cut short when the door opened again with a loud bang. Two figures in billowing black cloaks stormed in, wearing white drama ‘sorrow’ face masks adorned with a single stark tear of blood, black hair jutting up at crazy angles, and shimmering fake green eyes. Everyone froze in alarm, looking like deer startled by a bright light. Harry, however, was trying his best not to laugh, but he was hard pressed to stop the derisive chuckle that threatened to burst from him.

As Harry struggled to keep from laughing out loud, the figure in the rear slammed the door closed. The lead figure slowly raised a fist, a wand clutched tightly in it. "Silence!" he roared. "We have come to do the bidding of our master!"

The second form stalked slowly forward, causing Ron to scurry around the table and stand in front of Hermione of all people, wand in hand but clearly scared. Harry was almost certain that the effort of holding in his laughter was medically unsound and contrary to a prolonged life. The second one came to a stop before Harry and slowly went down on one knee. "What is thy bidding, my Master?" he asked in a hollow voice.

At this point, the pressure of keeping his amusement in check became too much. Harry lost control and burst out laughing. "Perfect!" Harry said appreciatively as he paused to wipe the tears from his eyes. "Where did you two get those outfits?"

Fred and George doffed their masks and wiped the sweat from their faces. "Trade Secret, old bean, Trade Secret," Fred replied. Harry just rolled his eyes and kept laughing at the twins and the way everyone had reacted to them.

His face crimson in outrage, Ron started yelling at his brothers. Neville slowly buried his head in his hands. Hermione started fanning her face with a bit of parchment. Ginny was watching the twins keenly, her eyes flashing with what Harry suspected was admiration for their handiwork.

After Ron had finally wound down and slunk back into his seat, Fred and George casually dragged two chairs from the pile of old furniture and sat on either side of Harry after pushing Ron out of the way. George clapped Harry rather hard on the shoulder, causing him to lurch in his seat. "So, young Harry, here we are."

Fred clapped Harry's other shoulder just as forcefully. "Quite right, brother mine. Here we are. Right, Harry?"

Harry shook off their hands and traded long looks with each of the Trouble Twins. "You're best qualified to know where you are, be it here, there, or in-between."

Fred cuffed Harry lightly on the head. "Stop being dense, Harry. You promised us a memory."

Harry quirked his eyebrow. "I don't recall making a promise of any such thing."

George snorted. "Sophistry, Harry. You said you'd show us. Here we are, so show us."

Harry paused to reflect on the situation. Fred, George, and Ginny were certainly entitled to see the memory of the fight in the corridor Sunday night if they were so inclined, and Harry respected Neville enough to show it to the boy if he wanted to see it.

Hermione was a risk – showing her anything like this would just add to her list of insatiable questions and might lead to more revelations than he was prepared for. Harry was a bit astounded that she was able to make lightning-fast connections to the very things that he himself had struggled to work out the answers to. It was probably an unfair comparison since at the time none of his mentors had answers to his questions; Remus and the others had worked it out one painful step at a time with Harry acting as the amazing magical guinea pig.

Ron was a definite problem. First of all, he clearly had extensive issues with Harry, probably due to the incident involving his sister and brothers. More disturbing, however, was that Ron did not seem to think anything through before acting – his impetuous response to Harry's baiting in Charms, his sullen reaction to the suppressed Howler – they were testimony to his rash and impulsive behaviour and only added up to problems here and now.

Harry frowned at Fred and George. "I'm not sure this is the right place to do this," he offered carefully. Hopefully the twins would understand his reluctance. The others were somewhat puzzled by the conversation, but Harry had no intention of spelling it out and hoped the twins would avoid it as well.

Fred exchanged a meaningful glance with his twin then turned to Ron. "What's it going to be, Ron?" he asked pointedly.

Ron was instantly on guard. "What do you mean?" he demanded loudly.

George shook his head in exasperation. "Look, Ron, your desire to protect Ginny is admirable, but do you really think Harry meant to hurt her?"

Ron flushed dark red but stubbornly held his ground. "Course he did. He was trying to kill all of you!" he shot back.

Fred held up his hands. "How do you know?" he asked quietly.

Ron opened his mouth to retort but suddenly stopped.

"That's right, Ron, none of us really know." George said pointedly. "That's what we want Harry to explain to us. But we don't want the explanation, we want to see it, and Harry here offered it to us. Well, to Fred and me, at any rate. Probably Ginny – if she wants to see it."

Harry let them argue it out. "You three are certainly entitled to see how events unfolded. As for Hermione, Neville and Ron... I'm not sure if they want to know, let alone whether they should know."

Neville was looking decidedly uncertain, while Hermione was starting to develop the glint in her eye that told Harry he was about to be on the receiving end of a pointed scroll of questions – or maybe a tome of them. Ron had a strange expression on his face, perhaps half-longing and half-fearing to know what the big brouhaha had been about.

Finally Fred spoke up, breaking the uneasy silence. "Dumbledore already said you were just defending yourself and that you didn't set out to kill anyone. How bad can it be?"

Harry shrugged in a noncommittal fashion. What Dumbledore had stated was certainly true, though Harry personally thought that it was

a truth that was on par with the truth according to Rita Skeeter. A casual conveyance would suggest one thing, but the reality was often far, far different. Harry had had every intention of killing the people that attacked him, and he knew it.

Resigned to losing this particular argument sooner or later, Harry carefully extracted the small Pensieve Remus had foisted on him from his bag. Placing it on the table, Harry focused on recalling the sequence of events from when he first stood on the stairs leading from the Headmaster's office. He was equally careful to cut the scene off before he hit the wall. There was no point in subjecting Ginny to any ancillary trauma based on whatever she had inadvertently done to him.

After depositing the memory into the small Pensieve, filling it to capacity, Harry pushed the bowl to the middle of the table. He slowly looked at each of them. "I want your word that you will not discuss what you see in this memory without my permission – not to each other or to anyone else."

After everyone gave their promises, Harry cast a few charms over the Pensieve, causing several small runes on the outside to glow faintly. "Alright then. All you have to do is stick a finger in the Pensieve. I've set the memory to run at full speed the first time you watch it. If any of you go in a second time, it will run at half speed."

Harry sat back as all the students glanced warily at each other. Like moths drawn inexplicably to a flame, they all slowly placed one finger into the silvery substance in the bowl. Harry leaned back to wait for them to experience the events and to individually decide whether they wanted to see the incident again. For his part, Harry had no need to view the memory once more, since he had relived most of it during his R.E.M. sleep state, albeit with 'interesting' variations on what actually happened. Harry felt that if his life was any more 'interesting' he would be checking into the long-term ward at St. Mungo's next Tuesday for a bit of a holiday.

Suddenly they were all standing there, staring at Harry intensely. Ron and Neville were looking a bit unsteady, Hermione was very pale, and

Fred and George seemed almost unfazed. Ginny, however, had eyes that were just a bit too bright and an enigmatic expression on her face.

Hermione, Fred, George, and Neville each slowly reached for the bowl and promptly went back into the memory a second time. Ginny sat and stared at the table surface. Looking extremely pale, Ron slowly put his head into his hands, shaking it side to side, moaning and muttering occasionally. Harry kept his face expressionless as he waited for some type of feedback from the Weasleys.

Harry watched as Ginny toyed absently with the pages of the Potions text in front of her. Her eyebrows knit together and then she raised her head to meet Harry's impassive gaze with one of her own. Harry could almost feel the energy flowing through her as she sat quietly, but her eyes betrayed nothing of her thoughts and emotions.

Ginny finally opened her mouth to speak only to close it and continue watching him. It was evident that she was trying to work out what to say but had no idea how to start. Harry had no clue how to help her with her struggle.

Just as she appeared to finally decide how to voice her thoughts, she was interrupted. Ron abruptly turned from the table and was noisily sick on the floor. Ginny closed her mouth with a snap, shook her head, and moved to her brother. Harry gathered up his unused papers and Potions text and shoved them into his bag. It was clear that this tutoring session would not cover Potions.

As Ginny cleaned up Ron's mess and helped him from the room, Harry leaned back to wait for the others to finish their second examination of the events. Almost the instant that Ginny and Ron stepped out of the door, the others were back and staring at Harry again. Neville and Hermione now looked like Ron – they were both pale and appeared deeply shaken. George was watching Harry while Fred scanned the room.

“Where'd Ron and Ginny get off to, then?” Fred asked.

Harry smiled half-heartedly. “Ron had a hard time with the images. Ginny took him to get cleaned up.”

Fred frowned at this. Hermione had her head in her hands. Neville was rubbing his temples in small circles, his eyes squeezed firmly shut.

George finally spoke up. "This was a normal occurrence for you then?"

Harry quirked one eyebrow. "Normal is one word that doesn't apply to me."

Hermione seemed to be fighting to control her stomach, and her hands were trembling slightly. "So much blood. There was just so much blood." She slowly lifted her head to stare into Harry's eyes. "Is this what you really want to do in life?"

Harry shook his head briefly. "No. But I have no choice in this life." Pushing Ron's quill around in lazy circles with a fingertip, Harry tried to articulate what they failed to grasp. "Look, you lot live in a normal world. People don't try to kill you regularly. People don't want to forcibly take your blood for Dark Rituals to resurrect Dark Lords. You worry about grades, about boyfriends and girlfriends, about what to wear, or about where to go."

Harry stopped playing with the quill and looked at Hermione. "I worry about staying alive."

Harry paused to stare in turn at Neville. "I worry about who is going to attack me next, and if I'll be able to fight my way out."

Harry turned and faced George. "I worry that Voldemort will catch up with me before I'm ready for him."

Finally looking at Fred, Harry finished his impromptu lecture. "This is not a game. If I fail even once, I'm dead. And then... then, so are all of you."

The silence that followed Harry's casual comments was profound. None of the students would meet his eyes, and Harry wondered if they understood just how trivial he considered most of their quotidian

concerns. Then again, human nature seemed to dictate that regardless of the overall scope of a problem, the problem immediately in front of you always seemed bigger and more important than anything else.

The others were still sitting in complete silence when Ron and Ginny returned to the room. Ron refused to even look at Harry and silently gathered his supplies with a reckless abandon, shoving them into his bag without concern. With nary a passing word, Ron turned and left the room. Harry detachedly noted that while Ron's complexion looked better than the random ghost wandering the castle, it still was a far cry from a healthy colour.

Ginny, however, returned to her seat and watched the others at the table. She seemed aware that something happened while she was out, or perhaps she just suspected it based on the very quiet nature of everyone in the room. "What did I miss?" she asked with a relatively calm voice.

"Nothing, really," Harry replied. "I doubt if any of you are comfortable with death." He was tempted to add the word yet onto that sentence, but hopefully they never would have to become comfortable with the idea. That was if he could get his plans restarted. Resigned, Harry sighed a bit before saying it anyway. "Yet."

Hermione looked back at Harry, lifting her head from her hands in slow motion. "What do you mean you worry that... that... that V-V-Vo... He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named... will catch up with you? Before you want him to?" This time even Ginny reacted, startled at the direct use of the much feared name.

Harry leaned back and contemplated the ceiling for a few moments. How much of the truth should he reveal to them? Bandyng about sensitive information such as Voldemort's return would probably put everyone he told in immeasurable danger. The one person who knew the whole truth – Dumbledore – was already being taken to task over the reality of the situation. And if someone as prestigious and powerful as Dumbledore was being attacked for seemingly 'coddling' the volatile and unstable shadowy figure that was Harry Potter, then maybe Harry should keep his thoughts to himself.



But then again, he had already told George most of it during their earlier conversation, and did Harry have the right to withhold information that might be critical to survival? Harry had experienced more than his fair share of being kept in the dark for his own good, and he disliked it immensely.

Surveying the faces looking at him, Harry was still undecided. If he revealed the truth, what would happen next? How would the word spread from these few students? And would it affect Dumbledore's intended discussion about how to get the full ICW to admit to the return of Riddle? The War Mages were convinced but held little political influence, and the whole night of Voldemort's resurrection was tied into the events around Nicolas and Wormtail. The short but fierce battle that took place after the resurrection was also full of dangerous information that should not be revealed to just anyone, particularly if Snape decided to take steps and become more invasive or found a way to circumvent the rings.

George finally broke the silence. "Let's hear it, Harry. You already told me that he's back. Fred isn't quite so accepting of it coming from me, though."

Harry blew his breath out and closed his eyes, massaging his temples in an unconscious echo of Neville, while he tried to decide what to say. "Look, I need you all to keep this quiet for now. We're trying to work out a way to reveal the truth and not get royally screwed for it. But yeah, Voldemort is back."

Harry opened his eyes and saw the drawn faces staring back at him. "He got a body back on the night of the last task in the Triwizard Tournament. It was not a pretty picture. His new body is ... very different."

"How do you know this?" Hermione asked quietly.

Harry smirked at her. "I was there, of course. Can't have the Dark Lord's resurrection gala without the cause of his downfall there to witness the events, right? I was the guest of honour, you might say."

Fred leaned over. "Let's see it then, Harry. Put that memory in the Pensieve, right?"

Harry shook his head. "No. That's not something for you to see." Ignoring the looks of disbelief the twins were giving him, Harry pulled the memories of the corridor attack out of the Pensieve and placed them back in his head. He needed to start thinking of something else or else his temper might start to build up again, and that would not help him in the forthcoming Potions class.

"Why not?" George asked loudly.

Harry stared at George, not caring that his expression was very cold. "There are things you don't need to know. And that night of Dark magic is one of them."

Fred looked ready to burst. "You've got our oaths to not go Dark, or even help those that are! What's the big deal?"

Harry stood up and grabbed the Pensieve, carefully tucking it into his bag. Looking directly at the twins, Harry gave them a deeply irritated look. "You cannot possibly justify needing to see that."

With a short nod at Hermione, Neville, and Ginny, Harry left the room behind to find some peace before heading to the tower for the Potions lesson. In his current state of mind, he was more likely to kill Snape if the man pushed him too far than just Stun him like he did with Umbridge. Murder would definitely not earn him laurels from Remus and Sirius.

Harry finally settled on flying to the top of the North Tower and sitting upon the edge. While the new Potions classroom was just below him, the view from the top of the tower was quite calm and refreshing. Perhaps if he could arrange to work by a window he would be able to drain his anger with natural scenery.

"That could have gone better, Mr Potter." Floppy's tone was neither accusatory nor welcoming.

“Not now, Floppy,” Harry replied with a sigh. “I need to think of other things for a while.”

“As you wish, then.” The Hat returned to an inert state as Harry settled firmly on the ledge of the tower.

Far below him, he noticed that Hagrid appeared to be running a Magical Creatures lesson for some younger students, as they were all clustered around a series of small crates by the back of his cabin on the grounds. As Harry watched with passive interest, there were faint screams and suddenly the entire class bolted in different directions from whatever was in the crates. Harry had to chuckle as Hagrid grabbed whatever was crawling out of one crate and wrestled it back in before slamming the door so hard that Harry could clearly hear the echo from his perch.

Keeping one eye on the time, Harry spent an enjoyable ten minutes or so alternately watching Hagrid try to get his class back together and just admiring Hogwarts’ picturesque setting. Nestled in a valley Harry estimated as roughly fifty miles northwest of Glasgow, the untouched woods and surrounding snow-peaked mountains were quite attractive. Harry was almost certain the Forbidden Forest ended near the Argyll Forest region.

When the time for Potions was near, Harry gave up his perch and dropped back over the edge of the tower on his broom. The little bit of peace and quiet he had regained would hopefully carry him through what would invariably be a very trying lesson. Pausing by the first window he was sure would not open into the Potions classroom, he quickly cast an unlocking charm on it before pushing it open and hopping into the corridor. Shoving his broom back into his bag, he caught the tail glimpse of Dean and Seamus heading down the corridor, talking with the two giggling girls whose names Harry could not recall.

Following them around the corner, he was somewhat surprised to find a rope ladder hanging from a trap door in the ceiling. The others were already climbing up, so, despite his belief that this was even stranger than temperamental staircases, Harry followed them.

The room he entered was quite a contradiction to his senses. The six very large windows were all firmly shut, but no drapes were present to cover the light streaming in. Meanwhile, it appeared an interior decorator with a serious bent for gothic styles had run amok. The walls were a uniform dark charcoal grey, while the floor and ceiling were both flat black. In the centre of the room were ten tables, a dark and sickly yellow, for two people each, and around the edges of the room were large laboratory work benches, each a light grey. The deep scarring of the workbenches was a mute testament to the many potions brewed incorrectly upon them.

Seeing that there were several tables empty, Harry proceeded directly to the back of the room, sitting by one of the large windows. Knowing that this class would end up being a contest of some sort between Snape and himself, Harry hoped that by isolating himself at the back of the room the emerging conflict would fail to spill over onto his classmates.

As Harry unpacked his materials, Snape strode out of the back room and stood beside the massive, monolithic granite teacher's desk. With two sharp flicks of his wand, the trapdoor slammed shut and glowed brightly, indicating a very advanced locking charm. Harry was less impressed with what he did than the casual manner in which he did it. Snape's command of non-verbal magic was, for all intents and purposes, complete. Advanced locking charms were tricky to do silently, a fact that Harry had learned the hard way.

"So," Snape began in a soft hiss, "here we are." The man slowly surveyed the group of students who were all shifting nervously. "Alone. At the top of a tower. Far from anyone who might... hear us." The oily tone in Snape's voice was enough to make Harry want to draw his wand, but he knew that Snape would be keeping a very close eye on every move Harry made.

"Mr Potter." Snape paused significantly while slowly eyeing Harry up and down as though inspecting some particularly vile material. "How... nice... to have a celebrity among us." The sibilance that Snape was

using emphasised the complete loathing that was clearly mutual between the two.

“Tell me, Mr Potter. What is the primary ingredient to the Draught of Peace?” Snape let one hand trail slowly across the desk as he walked to the centre of the classroom, his cloak billowing slightly.

“I wouldn’t know, sir,” Harry replied with as much respect as he could summon for someone he disliked so strongly.

Snape smirked outright. “Tut, tut, Mr Potter. That will be ten points from Gryffindor. Clearly, your infamy isn’t everything, no matter how powerfully Dark you may be. Let’s try again. Tell me how to counter the effects of the Draught of Peace.” Snape’s gaze on Harry left him with a sensation of desperately needing a bath.

“I wouldn’t know, sir,” Harry again replied, keeping his tone even.

“So you are not only arrogant but also ignorant. That shall be a further ten points from Gryffindor, Potter. One more try, then. Tell me how to prepare hellebore syrup.” Most of the other students were shifting uneasily, keeping their heads down as they apparently waited for Snape to vent his frustrations on the easy target that was Harry.

“Which type of hellebore syrup do we need, sir?” Harry asked as pleasantly as he could manage.

Snape scowled so deeply that Harry thought the man might start leaking grey matter from the vacuum forces at work on his face. “What are you getting at, Potter?” Snape demanded in a cool voice.

“Well, you asked for the ingredient as ‘hellebore syrup.’ Are you referring to the Niger type, which is useful for healing wounds? Or perhaps you mean the Foetidus, which supposedly cured the madness inflicted by Dionysus? Or did you mean—”

“Enough!” Snape spat. “We are using the Lividus hellebore, Potter. Now get on with your explanation!”

Harry paused to write down on the corner of his notebook the specific type of hellebore plant required.

“What is the concentration of the syrup, sir?” Harry put on his best winning smile, ignoring Neville’s earlier warnings. Surely this smile would make someone like Fudge proud, not someone like Voldemort.

Harry knew his polite behaviour was driving the Potions professor barmy, but he really felt that the request was completely inadequate. If Nicolas had caught Harry writing down an ingredient as poorly specified as this, Harry doubted he would see daylight for months since he would be so involved in musty tomes of magical ingredients to learn the ‘finer aspects’ of magical ingredients.

Snape slowly exhaled and seemed to be counting the bricks on the back wall. His tone, however, could have frozen the lake in front of the castle during August. “One part in seventeen by volume, to a base of five-percent saline, Potter. Now is there anything else you would like to ask before admitting even more ignorance?”

“Thank you sir, just one more question. Would that be a sodium or potassium saline, sir?” Harry tried for the best impression of Hermione he could arrange on his face. His efforts were rewarded with a slow tic appearing in the muscles over Snape’s right eye.

“Sodium, Potter.” Snape continued to alternately glare at Harry and the wall behind him.

“Thank you, sir.” With a grand flourish, Harry updated his notes to cover all of the additional details revealed. “Surely you just overlooked such little details in your haste to be sure I knew how to prepare a proper syrup, sir.”

With a broad smile, Harry stood up and cleared his throat. “To extract the essence of *Lividus hellebore*, you would first gather the nectar petals at dawn and then crush them into a pulp. After straining the pulp through a cheesecloth, the colloidal liquid result must be boiled until all the water has vaporised and only a blue powder is left in the cauldron. To prepare a one to seventeen syrup based on five-percent

sodium saline, you first must prepare the saline mix. By requiring five-percent weight-volume of sodium chloride in a base of deionised water, you would add five grams of purified sodium salt to every ninety-five grams of water. To effect the desired concentration of one in seventeen by volume, equal measures of powder and fluid content between essence of Lividus hellebore and the saline base would be mixed in the proper ratio. The end result of this mixture is your desired syrup of hellebore, sir.” Harry then sank into his chair with a flourish.

The tic above Snape’s eye was much more rapid now. As the man scanned the classroom, his expression grew very dark. “As shocking as it is that you might actually have something in your head other than your ego, you are... correct.” The sour expression on the professor’s face made Harry wonder if there was a magical way to recreate that expression on others.

Snape turned abruptly to stalk behind his desk. “You will be brewing the Draught of Peace today.” With a flick of his wand, the blackboard at the front of the room became filled with miniscule writing. “The instructions are on the board, and—” with another flick the cupboard in the front of the room opened “— the ingredients are ready. You have exactly ninety minutes. Begin.”

Snape stood and watched the students scurry about to obtain their materials and hastily scribble down notes on the brewing process. As Harry took notes on the basic process and steps, he observed Snape glare and scowl as each student passed by in turn. Finally taking a deep breath, Harry proceeded to the front to obtain his supplies. He could feel Snape’s eyes boring holes in his back the entire time. Opting to simply ignore the man, Harry returned to his seat with a fake smile plastered on his face.

Harry spent a few minutes quickly setting up his cauldron and raw materials on the lab table adjacent to the window. Since he was at the back of the classroom, the only way in or out of his work area was along one narrow aisle through the desks, or else by walking along the back of the classroom.

As Harry slowly started the fire and prepared the base solution of water and buffer ingredients, he could hear Snape moving about the room, levelling devastating criticism for poor techniques yet never correcting anyone or teaching the proper methods.

The soft rustle of fabric was the only indicator that Snape had entered Harry's work area. "You chop the root, Potter, not mash it! That will be ten more points from Gryffindor!" Snape snarled his criticism and stormed off, headed to where Neville and Ginny were working together. Harry shrugged absently and went back to mashing the galanga root rather than chopping it. He knew from Nicolas that it required full saturation with magical essence to turn galanga into a strong magical buffer to limit the rate of reaction. Chopping the roots would only impart the weakest of strengths to the buffer, making the potion much harder to control during brewing. In the end, it all boiled down to how much you handled the root.

By the time Snape had docked every Gryffindor some measure of points, while praising the pitiable few Slytherins, Harry had reached the first critical phase in the brewing process. The powdered moonstone, which Harry found to be far too old to be as potent as it should be, would require a vicious acidic reaction within the other ingredients.

To bring out the dreaming essence contained within the stone, the moonstone must be a natural product from the magical mines in Sri Lanka. For some reason, other moonstone sources lacked the proper essence, and only that geographic area could produce proper magical moonstones. The individual flakes that formed the core of every moonstone each contained a minute amount of potent dream-inducing magical energy, and the raw potassium silicate matrix that held it suspended had to be dissolved first. The potassium would have the added benefit of limiting excess sodium from the body during the effects of the potion to prevent a gradual hypertension.

Harry carefully added the powdered moonstone and then began stirring to maintain a fixed rate of reaction. Harry always hated risking his wand by stirring potions, but he knew it gave the best results by imparting any necessary extra energy to the process. After the



requisite duration of brewing, Harry added the Lividus hellebore syrup to begin neutralising the acidic action in the cauldron.

As Harry leaned back, Snape's sudden yell made him jump reflexively, whipping his wand from the potion and pointing it directly at the man. "Potter! You do not stir a potion with your wand! Another fifteen points from Gryffindor!" Sneering at Harry, who was still breathing hard and fast from the surprise of the Potions master, Harry could almost swear that Snape was laughing at him inside.

"And you have your wand trained on me?" Now Snape's voice was a soft caress of malice. "That will be another fifty points. If you do not put your wand down now, I shall give you detention for two weeks." Harry slowly lowered his wand, fighting to keep his reactions under control. Harry hated having people sneak up on him when he was concentrating on anything. Even worse was a completely untrustworthy person like Snape managing to pull off the surprise. "Amazing, you can follow instructions – when your brain understands them," Snape stated loudly enough for everyone to hear clearly.

Snape leaned forward until his nose was mere inches from Harry's. The man pitched his voice such that only Harry could hear him. "You're mine, Potter. Next month, I've got you."

Harry was unable to stop his completely reflexive sarcasm. "What can I say? I'm thrilled."

Snape sneered at Harry for a moment, his eyes alone promising misery immeasurable for Harry during his month-long bout of detention. Finally, as Snape turned and strode back over toward Ron and Hermione's table, Harry got his breathing back under control and contemplated how best to save his potion.

"You didn't really think you could get away with all of this, did you?" The silky whispers of punishments and ominous unspecified pleasures that Harry would be facing during his detentions with Snape were slowly eating through the firm barriers he had placed on his normal reactions. While Snape had failed to sneak up on Harry a

second time, the man had been muttering in his ear for the past hour or more. "Whatever you do, Potter, I can easily undo."

Harry continued to patiently stir the cauldron, while closely monitoring the heat from the flames, as his cauldron began to give off a dark grey vapour in small puffs. It was quite unsuitable as the Draught of Peace, but it was a far cry better than most other student potions. Harry had managed to recover most of the reactions after some hard work, but the inability to stir with his wand was hampering the corrections he could make.

Snape, however, seemed completely unconcerned with what any student was doing, most especially Harry. All he wanted to do was drill into each student for the slightest mistake, using any pretext to launch a vicious character assassination attempt. Harry had witnessed both Neville and Ginny having their potions Evanesco'd after either adding too much galanga root or stirring a cauldron one time too many, respectively. How anyone could learn in such an environment was beyond his skills to comprehend. If Harry had not received the extensive training in Alchemy imparted from Nicolas, replete with a thorough knowledge of magical ingredients, he was certain that he would be horrible at Potions in this environment.

As Harry finished stirring and killed the flame, he heard a soft plunk! and turned to see ripples across the surface of his potion. Snape was immediately standing behind him, eyes once again flashing in triumph as Harry's potion turned a putrid green. "Mr Potter, what is this?" he asked in a voice that was overly casual.

Harry could think of no way to answer the question without causing quite the scene. He could either accuse Snape of sabotage with no evidence, or he could try to state the truth that someone, most likely Snape, had put something into his potion. Either way, he would certainly be ridiculed and belittled.

"It appears to be a potion, sir," Harry said with a smile that could only be described as plastic.

“That will be zero marks then for today, Mr Potter. Evanesco!” Snape’s eyes challenged Harry to try to do something about the situation. When Harry continued his facially distorting smile, Snape finally looked away to the rest of the class.

“The lesson is over. Drop a flagon of your potion on my desk if you have not received a zero, and everyone leave.” Snape’s voice was firmly into the malicious and silky stage, as he stood blocking the aisle Harry was in so that there was no way for Harry to leave the room without climbing around the man. However, with Snape’s back toward him, Harry decided he had no desire to loiter and have Snape spew whatever was on his diseased, serpentine mind.

Harry quickly and quietly packed his materials. Pulling his broom case from the top of the bag, he stalked directly to the window behind his table and threw it open with a reverberating clang! as the frame slapped against the outside wall.

“Potter!” Snape shouted at Harry, but Harry had no intention of stopping to listen. With one smooth move, he vaulted out of the window and enjoyed a moment of free-fall and Snape’s shouts from within the classroom, now lost in the whistling wind of his passage. Pulling his Firebolt under him, Harry rocketed off at maximum speed for the gates of the castle. Nice-Nice. Remus and Sirius were about to get a lesson in playing nice-nice, he was sure.

When Harry activated the Portkey outside the gates, he landed softly behind the cottage he called home. Pulling both his wands out, Harry tried to decide how he was going to proceed. The problem with the disruptor fields around the property was that the only magic you could cast while inside the fields was the magic you brought in with you.

Coming from such a low-energy class like Potions, Harry was fairly certain he was close to fully charged in his core, but it was a given that Sirius and Remus would be near fully charged as well. They made a point of leaving for a few hours every day to recover from any magical energy expended during the prior twenty-four hours.

Taking a deep breath and deciding that this situation called for trickery rather than brute force, Harry unconsciously donned his wolf smile and stepped across the ward line.

Before he had taken two steps, the back door opened and Sirius stood there, smiling broadly at Harry. Harry inwardly was quite gleeful to have a stationary target and carefully kept his hands held behind his back. Harry made a broad show of walking casually toward Sirius, keeping his gait friendly and rolling. As he got closer, however, Sirius' internal warning detector must have gone off, for he paled briefly before turning and diving into the back of the house with reckless abandon.

“Remus!” Sirius yelled out. “Harry’s on the war path!”

Swearing softly, Harry ran to the back door and ducked to one side, peeking around the doorjamb. Sirius was so going to get a lesson in making nice-nice with the locals. And then Remus would have to be tracked down...

The return Portkey trip dropped Harry off in front of Hogwarts. For once, he was too tired to even care about the beautiful sight of the magical energy shooting off from the gates. The running battle with Sirius and Remus had consumed most of the evening when he was not directly training with Master Gata. Studies of the theory of magic were fine, but prank wars always came first.

And Harry was almost certain that Remus would find a cure for Sirius' eyebrows, which had become twelve feet long, around three stone of combined weight, and virtually indestructible. It would probably take some time for Harry to get his own clothing to stop emitting puffs of smoke randomly, though, so he was not in a substantially better position than his godfather – possibly in even a worse position if Remus' spell had been tied to his body and not his clothes. It seemed Remus may have won the latest round, but tomorrow was always another day – and it would be at least tomorrow morning before Remus stopped sounding like Donald Duck. Harry was proud of that curse, since it had taken him days to work out all the details.

Working magic at home always required the trade-off between power and craftiness. Since very energy-draining magic like shields, Stunners, Summoning or Banishing Charms would tap core reserves quickly in a real fight, they had each learned long before to use stealth, surprise, and peculiar low-power spells like cosmetic charms to raise pranking to a type of New Art. True skill was in how you used the forces that magic offered and not how powerful a spell you could toss around without getting burned.

“Harry!” The echoing voice down the corridor caused Harry to spin lightly, and he was amused to see Fred and George scurrying toward him. They both looked rather flushed with excitement or, perhaps, from running down the corridor to catch Harry.

“Yeeeeeeesss?” he asked the twins, drawing the one word out into an entire welcoming committee. Harry always felt much better after venting his pent-up tension in a good prank battle.

“You won’t believe it!” Fred said excitedly between pants of exertion. “Those rings that scream when Snape goes picking your brain? We’re selling them like mad!”

Harry smirked. “Good. So the practical demonstration during lunch was useful?”

George took over for his panting twin. Harry was amused to see that while they might look alike, they clearly were not in the same physical condition. “Definitely. We’ve had to distance your part in them a bit, though. People will still sign off on the oaths, but we’ve led them to think these are our design and you just fronted the money.” Fred was nodding his head while catching his breath.

“You’re hyperventilating, Fred. Hold your breath for a slow twenty count, you’ll feel better,” Harry observed. Looking back at George, he just shrugged. “If it sells them, it’s fine with me. I’ll even get you the design, so you can make them yourselves. We’ ll negotiate a new split when you start making your own, right?”

Both of the twins adopted a wide-eyed expression of glee. "Sir, yes, sir!" George threw a snappy salute, inadvertently poking his own eye with his thumb. "Ow! Ow! Ow!" Harry just laughed at George while he danced in spot, one hand covering his eye. Fred was shaking his head but appeared to be fairly well recovered.

"Anything else, my faithful followers?" Harry asked Fred.

Fred smirked back at Harry before jerking his thumb at George. "Never could take him anywhere. Those rings have been singing a siren song of love all evening. Snape is really on the warpath. It's great that Snape's having to give up his casual reading of students' minds that have the rings. It's funny to see a first year running down the corridor away from Snape while screaming, 'La! La! La!' at the top of their lungs. The best part is that apparently Snape can't punish a student for running away from him!" Fred was grinning with malicious glee, apparently in a fond memory from earlier.

Even George stopped prancing, smiling dreamily while recalling the episode. His voice had an echo of the ethereal quality of dreams. "Dumbledore told Snape that he couldn't in front of a bunch of us outside the Great Hall."

"Very nice," Harry smiled in return. "Well, I'm off for a fun little chat with the Headmaster, so I'll see you two later."

George rubbed his eye a bit but looked extremely curious. "In trouble again there, Harry? What for this time? You didn't take down someone else without your followers, now did you?"

Harry's clothing decided this was the perfect instant to release a huge puff of smoke, rapidly filling the immediate area in the corridor. After much coughing and hand-waving, the twins looked around to see where Harry was. Harry, standing directly behind them, reached out and smacked the back of both their heads at the same instant. The twins immediately jumped sideways and glared at Harry.

"You're not volunteering to be my next victims, now are you?" he asked with a wide smile. The combination of Remus' little Smoke

Screen charm tied into some Time Randomiser Hex was perfect to play with the twins' collective mind since it went off at such an opportune moment. The Time Hexes were one family of magic that Harry used very, very carefully. His first few attempts had led to rather disastrous consequences for his goldfish. Hedwig had enjoyed the results, however.

The twins both furtively shook their heads and slowly took a few steps back. Harry shook his head while laughing softly. "Right, then. I'm sure I'll be finding out what Dumbledore wants shortly. Later, gents." With a casual wave, Harry walked off, leaving the twins staring at each other.

Harry felt no need to correct their initial impressions. It was probably better if everyone suspected that the time Harry was spending with the Headmaster was related to his various punishments for less-than-upstanding Hogwarts behaviour.

As he resumed his trek to the Headmaster's office, Harry started becoming rather nervous. Today had seen quite a few incidents that he was sure the old man would want to review, perhaps in painful detail. And then Cyril was bound to be someplace nearby, and talking with Cyril would most likely involve yet another rehash of what was going on in the castle.

Sighing, Harry gave the password to the gargoyle before knocking on the door and entering Dumbledore's private sanctum. The Headmaster smiled as Harry walked in. "Please, take a seat, Harry."

Feeling somewhat as though he was a sacrificial lamb being led to the altar, Harry dropped into the seat Dumbledore indicated. Without warning, Harry's clothes again shot a ball of smoke into the air that engulfed both of them. Fawkes gave a cry of indignation before flashing out of the room.

As the Headmaster cleared the air, Harry just smiled blandly. "Sorry about that. Remus got me with a twisted bit of magic I haven't unravelled yet."

Dumbledore chuckled lightly, waving his hand in a gesture of dismissal. "Family problems are always murky, Harry. Let us begin by discussing what is going on here at Hogwarts." Pausing to collect his thoughts, Dumbledore absently poured two cups of tea, much to Harry's chagrin. Sooner or later, he was sure he would not be able to go through one of these meetings drinking gallons of tea without becoming violent.

After Harry politely declined a cup, Dumbledore took a sip and tented his fingers while leaning forward on his elbows. "I spent nearly an hour conferring with Severus last night, Harry. I am unhappy with the outcome. No matter how I approached the topics, it was evident that Severus had no knowledge of the attack upon you or the attacks done by Slytherin students through the years, and yet it was equally evident that he knew something. What exactly he does know, I cannot say."

Dumbledore paused as Fawkes burst back into the room, but both he and Harry had to laugh out loud as Fawkes landed in Harry's lap and trilled a song of condemnation. "I suspect Fawkes did not appreciate being awakened in such a crude manner, Harry," the Headmaster speculated. Harry tried to calm Fawkes in the same way he calmed Hedwig, with casual stroking of the feathers and scratching of the skin in places birds would have a hard time reaching.

As Fawkes quieted down and closed his eyes in response to Harry's ministrations, Dumbledore leaned back and resumed his summary. "I believe that Severus is working in conjunction with others but cannot as yet prove anything. I am, however, keeping a close eye on him. Moving him to the tower was one step in reducing his influence, but it also makes it easier for me to monitor with whom he is in contact."

Harry nodded his head. "I get weird impressions from him. On the one hand, he challenges me to give him Veritaserum and claims ignorance. During class, he insinuated quite a bit about events he claims to know nothing about. It makes no sense."

"Yes, it is a problem." Dumbledore stopped to reflect on the situation and enjoy his tea. "We shall have to continue to compare notes. I am certain you have something else going on with Severus, but I will



await those events to unfold in their own time. The only thing I must demand is that Severus not be imprisoned, Harry. I need the information he can provide.”

Harry smiled without realising it. “I don’t see him being charged with anything that could lead to time in Azkaban, Headmaster. At least, not right now.”

Dumbledore shook his head slightly, the twinkle in his eyes somewhat dull and lacklustre. “Very well. I tried to calm the students regarding you and your recent... actions, shall we say. Their reactions have been somewhat expected, given the situation. I am afraid that it will take quite a bit of good faith on your part, not to mention good behaviour, to smooth things over.”

Harry just smirked. “Good behaviour. That’s the ticket. I’ll get right on that, sir,” Harry replied while rolling his eyes.

Dumbledore coughed abruptly while drinking his tea, before hitting his own chest a time or two to get the coughing under control. “There you are, Harry.” Harry was somewhat puzzled by the twinkle suddenly going full force in the Headmaster’s eyes. “As I was saying, you should be able to smooth things over and perhaps make friends. I fear the approach of Slytherin students will take some thought on your part, but I’m sure you can think of something, Harry.”

Pulling out some notes on parchment, the Headmaster consulted a scroll in a strikingly reminiscent fashion to Hermione. Harry wondered whether there was a master list of Grill-Harry questions on this parchment as there apparently was on every piece of parchment in Hermione’s possession.

“In regards to the Head of House problem with Severus... this ties into Voldemort, so I must discuss it with you. As you know, Severus spies on Voldemort’s side for us. His duties as Head of House, combined with the time-consuming Potions lessons and inevitable cleanups, acquisition of supplies, and so forth, led Severus to tell me he lacked sufficient time to closely monitor the students of his House. He further informed me that he approached each student who was reported to be abusive or in conflict with others, handed out

punishments as appropriate, and forgot the matter as he had little time to follow-up with each situation.”

Dumbledore frowned for a moment, idly stroking his long beard. “While his explanations here, as everywhere lately, were logical and without flaw that I could find, the overall feeling I have is one of Severus deliberately misdirecting my inquiries.”

Dumbledore looked sorrowfully back at Harry. “Severus has given me the excuse that he lacks enough time for all his duties. Given his reactions on the night of the first attack and subsequent actions suggesting his involvement with the Daily Prophet, I felt it was time to eliminate this supposed problem of his. Therefore, I switched the Head of House status this morning. Officially, this is because Severus lacked the resources to keep up with his duties. Unofficially, this is so that I might monitor him more closely while he is here, and more importantly, so that he can spend more time insinuating himself into Tom’s graces. I have seen the evidence of Severus’ recent... welcome, shall we say, back into Tom’s ranks of faithful servants. To that end, I will be relaying to you what I learn from Severus as I find out the details. I trust this is acceptable?”

Harry simply nodded in response. Fawkes, apparently tired of the attention, flew back over to his perch before tucking his head under his wing and returning to sleep.

“With those things out of the way, I wish to spend the bulk of this evening exploring everything we each know about Horcruxes, Harry, and see what we may expect to come.”

With that preface, Dumbledore proceeded to launch into a sketch of the material he knew. Over the following hour and more, Harry and Dumbledore went back and forth discussing what they knew, what they suspected, and making educated guesses. The biggest problem was the detection and destruction of the soul cages. The destruction of the first Horcrux, the diary, had been under such a confusing confrontation and helter-skelter set of actions that it was hard to identify exactly what had successfully destroyed it. Harry and Dumbledore spent some time carefully reviewing his memories of the event, and while Dumbledore was clearly shocked and thoroughly

depressed by the sequence of events, he could not tell what events had been the magic ones to enable the destruction. Everything Harry and Dumbledore knew indicated that to destroy a Horcrux was not a trivial problem.

“Now that we have fully explored the theory of Horcruxes as well as we both understand it, Harry,” Dumbledore said while leaning back into his oversized chair, “I wish to discuss your plans for this Saturday.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Saturday, sir? Aside from detention and training, and perhaps a bit of business with the Weasleys, I have nothing of import planned.”

“Excellent!” Dumbledore said. “You see, there is a place that I wish us to go to, perhaps with Cyril, if he would care to join us. I would like to begin looking into Tom’s past, and your skills would be most useful for what I wish to do.”

Harry wanted to groan at how Dumbledore was trying to lead him around. “And just what would that be, sir? It’s late, and I’d rather dispense with the leading statements, with all due respect, sir.”

Dumbledore chuckled softly. “I would be more candid, but I know nothing concrete. I suspect, however, that we may be able to turn up some clues as to where we should begin looking into Tom’s past. You see, I think his past will be critical to understand, as that will lead us to locating any other Horcruxes he has made.”

Harry nodded slowly. “Very well, then. I’ll talk to Cyril about it, but anytime after lunch should be fine.”

“I think we shall call this your detention for the day, Mr Potter. I will speak to Mr Filch and release you from your detention for both Saturday and Sunday since you must also go to the ICW this weekend.”

Dumbledore looked carefully over the notes on his desk before nodding to himself and looking back at Harry. “One last thing, Harry.

Your new sleeping arrangements have been made. Cyril also asked me to set up a private suite of rooms for the two of you. In the passageway that contains the entrance to the Gryffindor common room, directly opposite the painting of the Fat Lady, there exists a suite of rooms guarded by a painting of a two-headed troll. The password is 'Redemption', and this will be your designated area for sleeping or meeting privately with your mentor."

Harry inclined his head. "Thank you, sir," he replied politely.

Dumbledore smiled wanly. "I doubt you will thank me later, Harry. You should proceed directly there now, as I'm almost certain that Cyril will be waiting for you."

Harry rose to his feet and politely said goodbye to the sleeping Fawkes before heading out of the Headmaster's office. Out of partially-forced paranoia, he came down the stairs with his left wand in hand and his right hand grasping the katana hilt attached at his belt. Moving through the hallways at the time of curfew was clearly going to wear on his nerves, as he would never know when an ambush might be coming.

Harry arrived in the corridor, noting the Fat Lady guarding the Gryffindor common room to his right as the painting of the hunch-backed two-headed troll was on his left. He was curious why he had never noticed the painting before, but realised he had only been to the area a few times. He would have to ask Neville or maybe Hermione about it later.

Entering the suite, Harry was confronted with a small common area with a pair of empty book cases, two stiff-looking large chairs with wing backs, and a rather comfortable three-person sofa. Three doors on the far wall showed two bedrooms and a small bathroom. One bedroom was clearly his, being rather Spartan in appearance. Harry saw his trunk and other possessions were already at the foot of the bed. The other bedroom contained several trunks, probably Cyril's possessions, although Harry refrained from going in and investigating. He doubted Cyril would appreciate Harry's rather strong sense of curiosity.

Resigning himself to waiting for Cyril to arrive, Harry started the fire in the fireplace and sat down on the end of the sofa by the fire, pulling out the book on wards he seemed to be forever trying to read. As the minutes ticked by, Harry felt himself becoming fully absorbed in the strange properties and subtle complexities of wards and their construction. He could begin to understand why Remus complained when the wards around their home in Brighton required even a minor modification.

The sudden sound of a throat clearing caused Harry to look up sharply. Cyril was sitting in one of the chairs across from him, and from his posture and slightly amused expression, Harry surmised he had been there for some time. "You didn't really check the room carefully, did you?" Cyril asked with a hint of disapproval.

"I didn't see any auras beyond the usual in the castle," Harry replied. Cyril's implication that Harry had just assumed the room was safe bothered him.

Cyril seemed only more amused but also disappointed. "Lad, I've been here since before you came in. Nicolas told me about your special visual abilities. I found a way to suppress my aura while maintaining invisibility."

Harry frowned at his mentor. "Alright, but who else is going to know to do that, let alone how?"

Cyril shook his head. "You've never made a real secret of your abilities, and you're not careful enough in hiding what you can do. It's safe to assume your enemies will figure it out very quickly."

Harry sighed in resignation.

"Don't take it so hard, lad. Most people become so used to having tools at their disposal that they don't know what to do when the tool suddenly stops working." Cyril paused to reveal a drink on the small table between the two wing-backed chairs. This was a further hint that Harry had failed to check the room, since both the table and the

drink had been invisible. “That’s what I’m here for, Harry. I’m going to start your real training.”

Cyril placed his hands on the arm rests of the large wing-backed chair, his weathered face settling into a picture of apathy. “Don’t look to me for sympathy, lad. I may like you, even though I think you’ve made a right mess of things lately, but I’m not here to be nice. Clear?”

Harry nodded, accepting that it was time for him to go to the next stage of training.

“I doubt most of the professors here understand the theory of magic as well as you do, Harry. And your years of martial arts, combined with magical duelling, leave you a very capable fighter.” Harry felt slightly awkward at the blunt yet generous assessment. “But you’re a right babe in the woods for everything else, lad.”

Cyril placed his drink back on the table before standing up to pace. “Tell me, Harry, why do you think Hogwarts will not even consider someone for a professor position before they are at least twenty-five years of age, but only under special consideration will hire someone under forty?”

Harry paused to think about possible motivations. The complete lack of any higher learning beyond Hogwarts was a real issue in any argument. There were trade schools – Auror, Healer, Unspeakable – that would require two to five years of additional study, but the bulk of the populace was simply cut loose after Hogwarts, their education complete. Harry was appalled whenever he considered the lack of basic mathematical training that most magical people received.

The only possible explanation was the obvious one. “Experience. Professors should have more than academic knowledge of their subject.”

Cyril wagged his hand slightly before stopping to stare at Harry. “Somewhat. Definitely the mentor should have first-hand experience with application. But the larger issue is life experience. If you gather more than one human into a group, some type of politics will erupt, pecking orders, all that. If you have to survive with your training for a

few years, you have a completely new appreciation for how even the little things can make a huge impact. Learning how to live, how to really work with others and not just around them, takes time and a lot of first-hand experience. Do you see?"

Harry scratched at the back of his head while nodding. "In the abstract, sure, it makes sense."

Cyril looked back at Harry and raised one eyebrow. "And do you realise that, in general, no one is allowed to become a War Mage Apprentice before they are thirty? That Nicolas had to have many long conversations to even take you as a student, let alone promote you?"

Harry was definitely surprised. Nicolas had never mentioned any conflicts and had made the entire thing seem to be a fairly simple process. Once again, his mentors were looking out for him, and he was unaware of how much they had to give up to help him prepare for what was coming.

Cyril resumed pacing and his narrative. "Mmmm. I spent the day observing you, Harry. I followed you from class to class. I am rather concerned. You act like the proverbial bull in a china shop. From what Albus told me and from what I have seen today, you came in holding the keys and as prepared as you thought you needed to be. Tell me, how well have you done with your goals?"

Harry shook his head slowly. "Not well at all."

Cyril returned to his seat. "Now tell me why."

Harry had no real answers for the question. He had spent some time talking to David about it, but Remus had deflected any effort to get insight. After reflecting on the overall situation for a couple of minutes, he just shrugged. "I'm not really sure. Too many things keep getting in the way."

Watching Harry for a few moments, Cyril finally stood, motioning Harry to rise as well. "Come with me."

Cyril led Harry to his bedroom, which was void of furnishings except a small desk, dresser, and typical Hogwarts bed. Placing a small stick on the floor by the wall, Cyril stepped back and took on a palpable air of concentration as he made intricate wand movements. With a last flick, the stick grew into a perfect mirror, seven feet tall and nearly three feet wide. It stood alongside a wall barren of any other objects, decorations, windows or doors. "Stand in front of the mirror, Harry."

Harry slowly moved to stand in front of the mirror.

Cyril sat on the edge of the bed, contemplating his hands. "Everyone has to learn to face themselves, Harry. Their actions, the consequences of their actions, the reactions to their actions. Ego, pride, lies, manipulations - these are the blanket you wrap yourself in. When you understand this, you begin to understand life."

Cyril moved to stand just behind Harry. In a flat tone, Cyril commanded his Apprentice. "Look into the mirror and tell me what you see."

Harry was unsure of what reaction Cyril was expecting or what the man thought Harry might see. "I see my hands, my clothes, my hair. I see you standing behind me. I see bits of the room around us."

Cyril shook his head in response. "Stare into your own eyes, Harry."

Harry tried to do what Cyril told him to, but he found it odd that he was unable to hold his own gaze for more than a moment or two. "Uh, Cyril, what did you do to the mirror?"

"Very little," Cyril replied quietly. "You must learn to accept yourself for who and what you are, Harry. You live, you make decisions, you act on those decisions. You do not yet appreciate the consequences of those decisions in full."

Cyril frowned at Harry for a long moment before turning and walking over to the door. "Until you can meet your own gaze for as long as I desire, you are to stare into this mirror every evening for at least ten minutes before bed. During this time, you are to reflect on your life thus far – what you have done, what you have seen, what your life



has wrought in the world. Once you can hold your own gaze, we will move on with your Apprenticeship. I will give you things to read in the interim.” Without another word, Harry’s mentor left the room.

Harry stood quietly, staring in puzzlement at his own reflection. For some reason, he doubted he would sleep easy any night soon.

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A/N:

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to cwarbeck and Chreechree. Thanks to random people for their aid with Brit-picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

Harry’s Schedule (all as of this point in the story, all holes are expected “free” or “detention” time):

Breakfast: 7:00 – 8:00am daily (at Hogwarts)

Lunch: 12:00 – 1:00 daily (at Hogwarts)

Dinner: 6:00 – 7:30 daily (at Hogwarts)

Library closes: 9:00 pm daily

Curfew: Years 1 – 3: 9 pm daily, Years 4 – 7: 10 pm daily

M/W/F: Herb Tutor, 8–9; Herb w/Huffs 9–11; COMC Tutor 11–12; COMC w/Slyth 1–2; DADA 2–3; Free 3+

T/R: Charms w/Raven 8–10; Transfig w/Huffs 10–12; Potions Tutor 1–2; Potions w/Slyth 2–4; Free 4+

Dumbledore Meetings: Mon, 8p–10p; Thurs, 8p–10p; Sat, 8a–10a

Private Training: Mon–Fri, 4p–8p; Sat–Sun, 10a–12

## Chapter 14: Spirit

Sat, 9 Sep 1995

Harry paused briefly to wipe the sweat from his eyes. The convenience of being able to train in comfortable settings inside the Come and Go Room regardless of the ambient environment was going to spoil him. It would clearly be turning into something of a mini-luxury that he could allow himself to enjoy on weekends, something that he did not often get during his normal training sessions with Master Gata. First of all, Harry's teacher thought the weather was irrelevant and, secondly, claimed that solid techniques were developed regardless of what Mother Nature may be inclined to do at any given moment.

Presently, the room had provided him with his cutting practice materials. A set of stout three-inch thick pieces of bamboo longer than his leg were each tightly wrapped in rice paper until they were roughly the diameter of one of Hagrid's thighs. Had it been a normal Muggle training method, the entire mass would have been soaked in water for hours, but the convenience of the room left him with what he needed in moments as opposed to hours of preparation and subsequent waiting. While not a perfect model of cutting through the human body, each was representative enough of the muscles and bone and worked well for modern students to practice their technique. The olden days of performing real cutting practice on prisoners were long gone from the repertoire of samurai bukiwaza.

As Harry lined up the segments in the pattern he wanted for the long sequence of cuts, he briefly thought back over the last three days and how odd his life continued to be. In all fairness, Harry had given up any attempt to be normal years ago and now just settled for getting what he wanted done with the minimum amount of hassle. If people wanted a show, he would happily provide one, but more often than not, the recipient of his attention was not thankful for the manner in which it was delivered.

Snape, for example, was engaging Harry in a strange game of cat and mouse. The problem was that, within the confines of the Potions classroom, Harry was clearly the mouse and Snape the cat. Outside

of the classroom and out of Dumbledore or Cyril's line of sight, it was more of a free-for-all. One moment, Harry would be trying to evade the man, and not twenty minutes later, Snape would be evading him. It made little sense to Harry, but he was glad that McGonagall had been unable to revoke his right to travel the corridors by broom. It made evasive action much easier where the banal Potions professor was concerned.

Harry was most puzzled, however, by his behaviour around Dumbledore or Cyril. Snape would clearly act as a mouse and intimate that Harry was acting as the predator, even if Harry was merely reading a book or chatting with Neville and Hermione. All in all, the erratic actions were leading Harry to think that perhaps the man was just plain repugnantly sly. It was further testament to the strange situation that Snape seemed to enjoy rather odd comings and goings, with weird hours kept according to the lights within his tower windows, but nothing concrete had materialised yet to indict Snape for any single act. Dumbledore had stated in their last meeting on Thursday that he had Snape under various levels of surveillance, and while his behaviour was certainly unusual, most adult wizards and witches had unusual movement patterns compared to Muggles.

Harry was willing to tolerate the odd mannerisms of Snape, along with the occasional grilling from some other professor when Snape made Harry out to be the aggressor in some petty verbal exchange, due to the simple fact that the man had yet to solve the Snape Spectre Spell from earlier in the week. Despite continuously changing his robes, cloak, and shoes, Snape failed to stop the random attacks by his loose clothing or the sudden onset of a puppet show to passers by. The much-touted prowess of the Potions professor had been brought to an all-time low as he was observed randomly casting a repeated Finite Incantatem! all over his clothing.

Snape had finally broken down Friday morning and appeared wearing simple trousers, a snug long-sleeved shirt, and shoes. No robes, no cloak, absolutely nothing to billow behind him and to intimidate the students. Which, of course, had been the entire point since there was no longer an echo of fear following the man everywhere. Harry spent the breakfast hour alternately fascinated by Hermione's eating habits and speculating on how the Snape Spectre Spell would morph now

that the clothing was less than pliable. Harry might be required to bring in one of the spell's variants. That would increase the risk of Snape figuring it out or even catching Harry, but he would have to wait and see what happened next to decide how best to proceed in his campaign to destroy the carefully cultivated image of fear the man sought. It disgusted Harry that this was a so-called adult who picked on those who never stood a chance of fighting back.

One lesson had been driven home clearly, though: Snape no longer scanned or attempted to scan students with appearances of Occlumency shields. Rumour had it that the bookstores and libraries around Europe were puzzled by the sudden onslaught of orders for basic books on Occlumency, but the twins had sold every student willing to sign the oaths a Ring of Alarm. So far, a couple of first-year Slytherins had signed the oath and purchased a ring, but otherwise that house was the last bastion of resistance to the idea of being a ring bearer. According to the Twin Trouble makers, by Wednesday night nearly everyone in Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor had bought a ring. The few holdouts held a special place in Harry's heart, but only time would tell what the future held in that regard.

While Snape and Harry's intricate dance of hatred and schemes provided much entertainment to many, Professor Dumbledore's chief amusement stemmed from Argus Filch, who astoundingly could not stop singing the praises of a student – Harry.

Filch had been given free reign by Dumbledore in determining Harry's punishment, as long as it was within reason. The caretaker had gleefully relegated Harry to scrubbing the castle floors in heavy traffic areas during the night. Even magic balked at properly cleaning the stones and mortar, so the only solution was repeated application of brute force and exhausting labour. Harry had done what he considered a reasonable job, but at the end of his two hour detention, a smirking Filch had announced that the job was quite unsatisfactory and, therefore, he could plan on scouring that spot every night until he got it right. A quick stop in a Muggle pool shop the next afternoon had solved Harry's problems entirely, and that was the end of all his manual labour.

Now Harry would put on quite the show, pretending to industriously scrub away at the floor to remove centuries of dirt and grime as Filch stood over him for a moment or two. As soon as Filch walked off to patrol the corridors, however, Harry threw down his brush. After some careful Perimeter Charms and an application of weak muriatic acid in several spots on the stone floor, he was comfortably settled in a conjured easy chair with the book on wards in hand. A Bubble-Head Charm for safety completed his pleasant reading environment. The acid completely etched the stone and mortar down and made everything bright and sparkling clean. As the time would progress, he would rinse off one region and apply the acid to another area. The book on wards was more than adequate reading material, and Harry found himself reading and re-reading several parts to understand how wards really worked. Although the book was short on theory, Harry found that by reading between the lines, he was starting to work out how the buffers and protective keys fit together.

Whenever his discreet Proximity Charm was triggered, Harry would cancel all the charms, Evanesco the acid away, and return to his show of hard manual labour, splashing some water from his wand about his person to make it look like he was beating himself silly to meet Filch's high standards. After being rendered speechless by the impossibly pristine castle floors, Filch had taken a real shine to Harry and had begun singing his praises to everyone. Filch rewarded Harry with the ultimate compliment – he now entrusted Harry to work without supervision on the floor in some other part of the castle, and would leave him alone for the two hours of hard labour.

Personally, Harry thought that he was suffering. Understanding wards was hard enough by itself, and attempting to do so with the lack of a proper drink was downright torture.

The Headmaster's madly twinkling eyes never left Harry's as Filch spent the entire breakfast hour on Friday waxing eloquent on Harry's superior cleaning prowess. Harry acknowledged Dumbledore with a satisfied smirk. Snape spent the same period of time alternately glaring at Harry and Filch, clearly frustrated that he had no idea how Harry had won over the man that the twins claimed could not be swayed.

The twins were another story entirely. Harry had gained a certain bit of awe on their part by winning Filch over, but it was balanced with their disgust in not knowing how he accomplished it. They continued to stake their claim as Harry's loyal followers, and they shadowed his every move, dubbing themselves the Potter Eaters. They also bragged quite loudly of their pranking accomplishments and intimated that Harry was going to be begging them for mercy very soon. Harry had subtly grilled Neville and Hermione about the truth behind the twins' claims and had come to realise that despite their abysmal class marks, they were quite accomplished at practical magic. In fact, he suspected they might be quite a bit better at Potions work than even Snape was. Certainly they were far more imaginative. Every prank that had been described to him involved Potions work at some level, and most pranking potions took some time to brew correctly. Harry was content to wait for the self-titled pranking kings while they boasted their skills and secretly brewed their concoctions. If he failed to avoid any potions-based prank before it took effect, Remus and Sirius would never let him live it down.

While the twins were not cowed in the least by the cavalier dismissal Harry had made of their pranking threats, they were completely intimidated by the ease with which Harry dealt with their mother. By this time, Harry had a fine appreciation for where the twins – and presumably any Weasley with a sense of mischief – got their innate mindset from. Wednesday had been another study in how to contain a Howler, as Harry had received three – one with each meal. Each Howler had been delivered with a different owl, and so far Harry had never again seen the decrepit Errol.

Harry had taken perverse pleasure in nullifying each Howler in a different way. He had again used dual Bubble-Head Charms to contain and ignore the first one. He simply Transfigured the second Howler into a glass of water and enjoyed the bubbling cacophony of sound. When the water began boiling, however, he quickly placed a freezing charm on it and left the block of ice on the table to disappear with the remains of lunch. Harry had dealt with the third Howler by working a very complex bit of magic to redirect the delivery owl back to one Molly Weasley, Ottery St Catchpole, while Confunding the Howler itself into thinking it was intended for that same Molly Weasley.

Harry estimated that she should have received her own Howler back shortly after midnight: a bit of a lullaby for her troubled conscience.

As the re-targeted Howler stilled from shaking bomb status, the final incoming owl fluttered briefly before taking off again. When Harry composedly answered the twins' inquiries regarding what he had done to the last owl, George shrieked like a little girl and bolted from the room. Fred simply stared at Harry as though Fred had the active brainpower of a comatose patient. Hermione and Neville looked on in undisguised horror, while Ginny cried herself hoarse from laughing so hard. Ron was still sitting in the middle of the other Gryffindors and had spent some time staring down at them, trying to determine the source of the commotion. To Harry's knowledge, no one ever enlightened him.

Molly Weasley had perceived the return of her third Howler as an open declaration of war. By the next day, Harry had no reason to think that the Weasley matriarch was ever a slouch at devious and underhanded tactics. Harry received no less than fifteen Howlers throughout the day – some came with owls, some came delivered by elves, and three had come disguised as regular mail, appearing during meals or during classes at random. If Harry ever received "regular" mail, he might have fallen for one of the latter, but as it was, the disguised Howlers were so laced with magic that he had no need to even touch the envelope before collecting it. By the end of Thursday, after destroying the first few to show up, Harry had started collecting them. When the day was done, he held ten bundled Howlers, each contained with a powerful Confundus charm to believe they were still in transit. Every Weasley in the castle was pestering him to know his intentions, and even Ron was curious – although he asked his siblings rather than Harry.

Instead of reading during his evening detention, he had carefully deconstructed the message contained in each Howler and made a ten-part serenade by breaking Elton John's song "Can You Feel the Love Tonight" across each one. Harry had then charmed them to trigger in sequence and placed a volume amplifying spell on each envelope. Deciding that his mission was accomplished, Harry had watched a freshly-laden school owl fly off into the night.

The complete lack of a Howler during the morning rush of owls had left everyone, even the staff, puzzled. When Ginny finally broke down before the twins could, asking him what he did with all the Howlers, Harry told her that he thought her mum needed a little more love and a little less frustration, and he hummed a few bars of the song involved. After much additional prodding and demanding, Harry finally relented and told his little group exactly what he had done. Ginny ended up on the floor from laughing so hard, while Fred and George were just struggling to come to terms with this new facet to both their mother and Harry. Friday had been a constant stream of attention from every entity with a brain in the castle. Even the portraits hounded him about what he had done to avoid the Howlers that day.

The coup de grace had been the delivery of a box of biscuits to Fred and George during dinner that evening. The note had explained that for the first time since they started Hogwarts, they had managed to go an entire week without a single complaint about them from any of the staff, so she was rewarding their good behaviour. The twins had been horrified to realise they had been spectators to the various goings on all week and resolved quite vocally to make the castle shake with their genius for the rest of the year.

Harry was reaching for one of the last half-dozen or so biscuits when his fingertips encountered a magical aura of enormous scale. Before the biscuit could literally explode and transform, Harry levitated it and cast a Bubble-Head Charm around it. The flames from the biscuit as it transformed into a Howler scorched the table and made Floppy dive off Harry's head, but since he had just barely cast the charm in time, only a faint buzzing and carbonized parchment remained of the Howler. The ensuing chaos kept everyone laughing for a bit, but the twins once again warned Harry he would be better off just accepting his chastisement before their mum got really worked up. When Harry asked if they had seen her more aggravated than this, all of the people nearby solemnly shook their heads. Ginny, however, simply observed that she was excited to see what would happen next.

Harry realised he was now in a full-out battle for bragging rights against the twins, the matriarch of the Weasley clan, and presumably with Ginny – if she recovered enough to resume their challenge.



Harry could not help but speculate about Ginny Weasley. She was an enigma that refused to resolve itself. During his first days at Hogwarts, his encounters with Ginny had left him with the impression that he would have got along rather well with her. He had caught a glimpse of a fiery, aggressive and outspoken personality, and he was therefore somewhat puzzled as to why her demeanour had remained with a complete turnaround after that now infamous fight outside Dumbledore's office. He understood the initial reaction, but her odd behaviour since Tuesday was baffling. He thought that she would have reacted in a different manner. To be fair, she did display a bit of moodiness before the fight, but it never lasted so long.

She still avoided sitting directly next to him, and she still flinched a bit whenever he used his wand in class around her, but his private tutoring classes with her were a bit better now that she was talking to him again. She would chat with Harry about mundane events or about his current battle with her mum or even describe some of the twins' more colourful pranks. Beyond these casual conversations, however, Ginny would go no further. Whatever she had been ready to discuss after the Pensieve event on Tuesday was once again firmly locked in her mind and was not likely to emerge anytime soon.

Nevertheless, Harry took it as a good sign that she seemed to be relaxing her guard to some degree. She would even joke around once in a while. When he had commented on the tameness of creatures that they were currently handling during her tutoring, she had wryly responded that he would soon enough come to look back fondly at his time with such simple things. Harry wondered if she had dealt with much wilder beings, given the rumour that had briefly circulated indicating she had helped Hagrid manage a pair of Graphorns he was keeping in the crates behind his cabin, but no one was certain what the truth might be.

Ginny had apparently made it quite clear to her brother that she did not need shielding from Harry, so Ron no longer tried to keep Ginny under his protective gaze all the time. He stopped treating Harry like a violent leper and contented himself with simply ignoring Harry, sitting far away during classes or meals. Harry was uncertain what was going on with Ron but was sure that the tall redhead would eventually confront him about his issues. Life would go on until that

day, but right now Harry was glad that the gangly fellow who had seemed cheerily casual on the train was no longer overtly hostile.

Umbridge, though, was the antithesis to the idea of life progressing. Whatever planet she had materialised from, she was clearly stuck in a fantasy land, leaving Harry convinced she had lacquered her brain decades ago and was incapable of new thought patterns. Sitting through her Defence Against the Dark Arts class had turned into a twisted game of attempting to charm the foul hag. Harry would force his face and voice into the most pleasant of facades while asking the most inane questions about Ministry-approved methods and classifications.

Harry had successfully tied up the entire Wednesday class when he asked her to explain the difference between a curse, hex, jinx, and counter-jinx. She was completely unable to properly place even one bit of magic without contradicting some Ministry-approved classification. Friday had Harry demanding to know the proper Ministry-approved methods to obtain help when confronted with a Dark Creature or – horror of horrors – a Dark Witch or Dark Wizard. After Harry's continued efforts to make her describe proper methods for countless scenarios, she had finally given up and dismissed the class early, much to the delight of everyone involved.

Umbridge exacted her revenge with an additional full month of detention on top of deducting a staggering number of house points despite – or perhaps, because of – Harry's wide-eyed protestations that he had shown nothing but respect whenever he had addressed her in class. He spent a long hour arguing with Floppy that whatever points he won or lost prior to being permanently Sorted should transfer with him whenever he was finally Sorted. Floppy eventually acceded and went so far as to take Harry's net impact off of the Gryffindor meter in the Great Hall. Harry was happy that his growing deficit would affect no other house, but was even more amused that he now had his own ruby meter in the Great Hall, labelled simply "Potter." Unlike those of the other houses, however, Harry's personal meter was more than capable of displaying negative numbers, and it was currently pegged at close to -380.

Outside of class, Harry completely ignored Umbridge, and this had the effect of slowly making the woman froth at the mouth, as he refused to acknowledge her presence when she attempted to talk to him. Whenever she became sufficiently insistent, he always hopped on his broom and took off. Harry's casual use of a broom as a means of transportation around the castle was now being emulated by the entire Gryffindor Quidditch team, although Fred and George were taking it to new heights by dive-bombing anyone at any time. When they were in their follow-Harry mode, however, they had rapidly learned that they were no match for some of the dives Harry was able to pull off and restrained themselves to keeping a healthy distance. Various staff members were grumbling about banning brooms from the castle interior entirely, but so far nothing had been done.

Hermione continually huffed when they would fly to and fro about the table in the Great Hall. Harry was growing used to the bookish girl's sense of propriety and general streak toward conformity, but he still could not handle her incessant need to barrage him with questions. He had taken to avoiding her, as he was unable to get anything done due to her relentless inquisition. She was still focused on his hints about magical theory. Harry suspected she already knew the next leap of logic to make but she was apparently determined to eliminate any counter explanations by pumping Harry for all the negative knowledge he possessed. Her efforts to mine the knowledge of what would not work that Harry kept in his head was driving him barmy. Harry had begun doing his homework during class to pass the time when he found that this one act alone seemed to stop her from grilling him like a charred steak.

Neville had become the anti-Hermione in Harry's mind. While Neville was clearly intelligent and had his own gifts in life, he never pushed for details that Harry chose not to volunteer. Neville seldom asked a direct question outside of what they were working on but always showed a compassionate nature that seemed to surround the core of the boy's essence. Harry knew there was courage worthy of consideration in there as well, but it was so deeply hidden that most casual observations would never indicate that Neville was worth his weight in gold.

Neville continued to quietly stand by Harry's side and was working hard to help teach him the finer aspects of cultivating magical plants, rather than just harvesting them. In turn, Harry shared some of his advanced knowledge in the alchemical properties that some of the plants they worked on were prized for. Unfortunately, he found that many of the plants they were working with, although quite commonplace, were completely useless for Alchemy or Potions.

Neville was striving to get Harry to recognise the subtle signs of good and bad within the life cycle, as well as dangerous or safe indicators, and so forth. Harry was slightly fascinated by the nutrient cycling and Neville's both intuitive and deep knowledge of what it takes for something to grow properly – straight and strong as opposed to bent and twisted. The demand for proper light, gentle care, and a minimum level of constant attention was a theme throughout their discussions.

While Neville was giving Harry hope that there were people out there who Harry would eventually find and value, most of the other students still seemed to be cattle just waiting for a trigger to stampede. Few of them made any efforts to reach beyond his mild anathema status. The Slytherins had en masse gone very quiet since the appointment of their new Head of House, and Trelawney had become a bit odder – if such a thing were possible. Hermione had nothing kind to say about the strange woman, so Harry felt that such an evaluation told him everything he needed to know about her threat level.

The Hufflepuffs were still avoiding Harry and anyone who associated with him, with the only exception thus far being their reluctant acceptance of the Occlumency shielding rings. The Ravenclaws kept one wary eye on him but otherwise settled into a pattern of collectively treating him as an object for indirect study. His own temporary house in Gryffindor was oscillating between distance and a bemused wary friendliness, with the Weasleys and their friends being the sole exceptions. When he had his own point tallies removed from the House status in the Great Hall, he had enjoyed a momentary renaissance of good cheer that evaporated almost immediately when the twins took to following him around the common room in their Potter Eater garb. Harry was still trying to spend a little time in the common room, but not much was attainable given his various commitments to Dumbledore, detention, and Cyril.

Cyril was a bit of a question mark as far as Harry was concerned. While he had met Cyril more than a few times under Nicolas' care and even studied with the man for an afternoon a few times, the nature of their relationship was something Harry found himself unable to characterise. Cyril was definitely a mentor, but Harry was unsure whether he was also a friend or if being a mentor by nature precluded friendship. Either way, Cyril seemed content for the past few days to merely hand Harry a collection of books on various spiritual topics with vague instructions to find enlightenment quickly. The Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind primer left Harry more irritated than calm, and The Tibetan Book of the Dead was dreadfully slow reading. Harry's favourite so far was the Tao of Pooh.

Harry found that his reflections on life with Cyril were only slightly frustrating when compared to the task that his mentor had set him. Studying his reflection was similar in many ways to harvesting rocks, Harry thought dryly. Spending time every evening trying to understand what his life had been about and why, Harry was left feeling that in the short six years or so he had been truly "cognizant" of life, he had done and experienced so much more than most people. Whether this was good or bad was still something he was unable to determine, but he was certain of only one thing – his life was definitely not normal.

Harry stopped his introspection when he realised that he was the only thing left standing in the room. The various rice paper-enshrouded bamboo targets had been cut into perfect pieces and littered the floor. Slowly cleaning his katana by repeatedly drawing a cloth from the tsuba to the kissaki, Harry worked off all the marks left behind on the blade.

After cleaning up his training area, Harry's stomach growled. Realising he had insufficient time to have a shower and get lunch before Edgar was due to arrive, Harry opted to just head straight to the Great Hall and grab a bite to eat.

As Harry dropped into a seat across from the twins and beside Neville, he realised most people were keeping one eye on him and one eye on the large entry points for owls near the ceiling. "Did I miss

something?" he asked casually while grabbing a bit of mutton and some salad.

Neville smiled absently. "Everyone is waiting to see what today's Howler Express will be."

Harry nodded sagely before returning his attention to his meal. He glanced up as Ginny sat across from Neville and caught sight of two owls streaking into the Great Hall as though the bats of hell were after them. Before he could fully process what was going on, the owls were slowly disintegrating into a stream of confetti as they flew in a decaying arc about the Great Hall.

He curiously squinted at the owls before suddenly realising that each piece of confetti was glowing brightly with the very recognizable signature of a Howler. With a surprised oath, Harry jumped up, flicked a wand into each hand, and rapidly constructed a sizzling net of power around him, using a level of speed he had never bothered to publicly reveal. Flicking his wand one last time, he sat down with sweat beading his brow and closely watched as the net took off like a rocket to collect the slowly falling, now smouldering confetti. Just as the net was harvesting the last few pieces of confetti, they all exploded as one, and a terribly magnified voice cried out, "HARRY POTTER, YOU HAVE—" before his old standby of the paired Bubble-Head Charms engulfed the entire mess.

Harry put his head in his hands, breathing heavily. The faint buzzing finally settled into a mosquito-like whine. He paused to savour the cold juice in front of him before looking up at the widely grinning faces of the three Weasleys sitting around him.

"She almost got you that time, old bean!" Fred crowed with delight.

"That's our mum!" George added, nodding happily.

Ginny had a gleeful look as she watched Harry. "And how are you going to get back at her now, Harry? All those baby Howlers, lost to your nefarious plans." She was definitely pushing the boundary of good cheer.

Harry slowly shook his head. "Oh, I'll think of something. Have no fear on that score." Most of the students in the hall seemed to have realised that the show was now over – Harry banished the confetti captured in the Harvest Net and Bubble-Head Charms into the grey and moody sky outside.

Chuckling happily, Fred reached into his rucksack and pulled out a small bag of apples. Grabbing his plate, Fred dumped the apples onto it and took one at random. After taking a big bite of his apple, he passed the plate to George with a nod toward the others sitting around them.

George also casually grabbed an apple, bit into it, then offered the plate to Harry.

Harry glanced quickly at the fruit and noted that every single piece – other than the two that the twins had picked off – was giving off a faint glow of sparks and magical energy. Realising that the twins had completed whatever concoctions they had been working on for the past few days, Harry was very curious as to their finished product. Carelessly picking an apple at random, he then made a show of courteously presenting the plate to Hermione and Neville.

Hermione peered suspiciously at him and then at the twins, but Harry just smiled innocently whilst he polished the apple against his sleeve, covertly Transfiguring it into a rock which he put in his pocket. He then conjured up another bright and shiny apple – it would not sustain him as a food source if he ate it, but it would baffle the twins so it was worth a little indigestion later.

With Fred and George watching him carefully, Harry took a big bite out of his conjured apple and pretended to savour it. "Wow, Fred," he exclaimed, making appreciative smacking sounds and looking at them expectantly. "These are really good. Did your mum grow them?"

"Err," George temporized, "yeah, she gave us a bag before we came to school." He trailed off uncertainly.

Seeing that Harry seemed to be suffering no ill effects from his snack, Hermione apparently decided to shrug off her reservations and opted to take one. With one last glance at Harry, who was still calmly eating his apple, Hermione took a dainty bite of hers.

With a loud bang!, Hermione sat frozen in her seat, her hair a bright and flamboyant red, permed into a style that would make any clown proud. Her skin was pasty white and covered thickly in freckles. Her clothing had turned a mix of bright orange and gold with pink lace-edge ruffles, three colours that looked hideous with red hair and pale skin.

Fred started laughing while George's face lit up with a huge smile. "Wicked Weasley Winesaps!" he said proudly, even as Neville scowled at him. Harry just shook his head slowly before starting to laugh along with the twins. Ginny's eyes sparkled as she absently toyed with the frilly pink lace at the hem of Hermione's shirt.

Hermione glared at Fred and George and pulled out her wand. She began a series of counterspells in an effort to undo the prank, even as the twins assured her that the effects would wear off in a few moments. As Harry continued to laugh at Hermione's bizarre appearance, a black ball of fur and leathery wings shot into the Great Hall and landed on his shoulder.

Harry abruptly stopped laughing. "Time's up, gents. It's all business now." With the twins curiously looking on, the little bat popped off his shoulder and transformed into the tall, thin, and handsome Edgar.

Neville looked taken aback when Harry showed no reaction to the sudden appearance of Edgar. "Err, Harry, is it true that vampires are all bat Animagi?"

Harry's response was interrupted by a little puff of smoke that soon cleared to reveal a normal-looking Hermione, staring with open fascination at Edgar.

Harry laughed quietly. "No, Neville, not by any means. Vampires all have their own unique Animagus forms. If I understand correctly, they undergo certain rituals before actually becoming vampires, and that is



when they gain the inherent knowledge as to what form they have.” Pausing dramatically, Harry eyed the small group sitting around him. “As far as I know, Edgar here is the only vampire with a bat form. A Greater Noctule, I think.”

George reached out and clapped Harry smartly on the shoulder. “Right, Harry, I’m sure Edgar’s a vampire. Good try, though.” Fred and George collectively turned back to their lunch with mild looks of disgust on their faces, as though they could not imagine that Harry would try so simple of a joke on them.

Harry smiled blandly back at the others. “No, really, Edgar’s a vampire. Has been for, what, six or seven millennia now, right, Edgar?” Harry wanted to laugh at the irritated face that Edgar made at the mention of his age.

“Centuries,” Edgar tersely corrected. “It’s centuries, Harry. Do I look like I’m a day over 671?” Edgar glanced at him sharply and bared his fangs with a sibilant hiss of warning before Harry could say anything in return. Harry just chuckled and looked back at the twins who were now staring with morbid interest at Edgar.

“Blimey!” Fred breathed. “How’d you get a vampire past the wards, Harry?”

Harry smacked Fred on the shoulder. “Right, Fred, I’m sure Edgar’s a vampire. Good try, though.” Rolling his eyes, he looked at Hermione. “Care to educate the ignorant, Hermione?”

At the mention of her name, Hermione blinked and seemed to partially wake up from a trance. “Err, sorry, what was that, Harry?” she said, flushing slightly.

Harry sighed. The one drawback to the Vampiric Entrallment was that it generally only worked on the opposite sex, which had been the cause of more than one bar fight over the centuries as girlfriends and wives abandoned their partners for the tall, dark, and typically handsome vampires roaming around in the night. Nudging Edgar with

his foot, Harry quietly told him to drop the enthralling magic or else Dumbledore really would kick him out for seducing the opposite sex.

Edgar refused to acknowledge Harry's comments, but the glassy look finally left Hermione's eyes. Curiously glancing about, Harry was surprised to see that despite the sudden appearance of a man standing by Harry's table, few people were paying attention to them. It was almost as if the general populace in Hogwarts was gradually being accustomed to the regular oddness that seemed to pop up wherever Harry was. Harry took this as a positive sign – they may not be comfortable with him or his life, but at least they were starting to accept it.

Harry suddenly realised that while Hermione was recovering from Edgar's accidental enthrallment, Ginny was just watching Harry with a speculative look on her face. When he raised one eyebrow in silent enquiry, she simply smirked and went back to her lunch.

Harry shrugged his shoulders in resignation. Females were generally hard to understand in the first place, but it seemed that Weasley females were in a league of their own.

"All right there, Hermione?" he asked the brown-haired girl.

Her face was still a little red, but Hermione stared determinedly at Edgar. "What kind of bat was that?"

Edgar buffed his nails nonchalantly. "Greater Noctule. A predator of living creatures, of course."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "You were black furred."

Edgar nodded slowly, looking puzzled at the statement.

Hermione suddenly shook her finger at him. "That family has light brown fur!"

Harry watched as Edgar's eyes widened in surprise before the vampire assumed a somewhat lofty expression and ignored the comment. Making a mental note to look into that minor fact later,

Harry opted for the expedient path of heading off any confrontation by appealing to Hermione's inherent desire to teach. "Err, right, Hermione, the twins were curious how a vampire got past the wards around the castle."

All thoughts of bats apparently vanished as Hermione lit up with joy at the chance to explain something that Harry might not know. "Either the Headmaster invited him, or he broke the wards the Headmaster put up last year to stop Dark Creatures, which is rather unlikely, or else he's not a full vampire."

Harry smiled at the bright witch. "Well, close, but no cigar, Hermione. There's a fourth option, but I'll let you figure that out later." The expression on Hermione's face rapidly cycled through irritation, frustration, and then determination. Harry mentally berated himself for twisting her tail yet again, as he was certain this only added another scroll of questions to her interrogation pool.

Before Hermione could go on the offensive, however, Snape slunk into the Great Hall, his once intimidating demeanour reduced to simply a gaunt and broken-nosed man who needed to wash his hair and perhaps find a more fashionable colour to wear other than varying shades of black. As Snape passed their table, he sneered down at the twins before looking at Harry and abruptly stopped in his tracks when he recognised the man standing next to Harry. "You!" he hissed, his face paling to a close approximation of Peeves.

"Ah, young Severus," Edgar turned to greet the Potions professor with widespread arms. He drew the motionless Potions master into a tight hug. Keeping his hands on the other man's shoulders, Edgar took a step back, a malicious half-smile on his face as he contemplated Snape's appearance. "Still having problems with the hair, then?" he inquired solicitously, his quiet voice carrying clearly throughout the hall.

"Vampires are not allowed in the castle!" Snape nearly yelled in response. Whereas the sudden arrival of Edgar had garnered little reaction, Snape's words caused most heads to turn and survey the latest drama by the Gryffindor Table.

Edgar shook his head in mock sorrow. “Really, now, my child, surely you would be more gentle with someone who saved you from that particular incident with the doppelganger in Warsaw, now, wouldn’t you? Although I have to admit, I think your doppelganger had that hair under control.”

Snape’s glaring contest with an impervious Edgar was brought to a halt when none other than Dolores Umbridge strolled into the Great Hall. As she came abreast of them, she glanced inquiringly at the stranger. Harry could not resist.

“Oh, Madam Dark Arts Defender,” Harry called in a sing-song voice. “May I respectfully ask what I was supposed to do – in a Ministry-approved way, of course – if I ever encountered a Dark Creature?”

Umbridge paused in her journey toward the staff table and stared at Harry intently. Apparently realising that there was no way to admonish him for asking such a simple question, she ground her teeth together audibly. “Notify the nearest Ministry employee or Auror, Mr Potter,” she answered in a frigid tone.

Harry smiled broadly, keeping his voice light and cheery. “And you are still a Ministry employee, being that message-taking, drink-fetching, memo-writing secretary-type to our beloved Minister, isn’t that right?”

Edgar twitched slightly at Harry’s choice of words. Umbridge seemed to be stuck between the desire to kill Harry on the spot and the desperate need to avoid walking into what was clearly a trap of some kind. Refusing to answer directly, she merely nodded her head.

“Brilliant!” Harry said with great enthusiasm. “I feel compelled to tell you that I’ve found a vampire here in Hogwarts!” The few students who had not heard Snape’s outburst were now riveted on the newsflash.

Umbridge gave a short bark of laughter that sounded like a squirrel being played alive. “Really, Mr Potter, do your stories know no limits?

Dark Lords, Dark Creatures, evil wizards and witches running around everywhere! It's all a bit much." The contempt in her voice left Harry chuckling warmly to himself.

"Honest, Fudge Secretary Umbridge Under Dolores!" he protested, his tone of voice belying his mild expression. Jerking a thumb at Edgar, Harry kept one eye on how she reacted to his next statement. "He doesn't even like garlic!" Taking that as his cue, Edgar swept forward regally and bowed to the toady woman, who was now alternately glaring at Harry and Edgar.

"Why, Madame Umbridge," Edgar's smooth, polished voice would have made the Queen's own furniture feel rough and pedestrian. "I'm so happy to finally meet you. I've heard so many enchanting stories, you see, that I have just been beside myself with anticipation." Edgar beamed at her, the carefully controlled smile revealing the faintest flash of white upon the vampire's bottom lip. "Aren't you pleased to make my acquaintance?" he asked with just a hint of plaintiveness, arms wide open in a gesture of great personal welcome.

Umbridge gave a low shriek, whipped her wand out and quickly glanced at the staff table. Somehow she failed to notice the nearly universal smirks watching her in return. "Headmaster!" she called. "Severus! We must work together to banish this foul creature!"

Dumbledore calmly put his glass of juice back on the table and looked down his long nose at the woman in front of him. "Really, Dolores, do you think it wise to attack a guest in front of so many impressionable young minds?" The casual tone of dismissal left Umbridge boiling as her face flushed a dark red.

"Now, really, Madame." Edgar looked at her sadly. "Can't we all just get along?"

Umbridge, if anything, became even more furious. "You're a dangerous Dark creature! A menace! A bloodsucker!"

Harry asked Fred in a rather loud stage whisper, "That's how we're supposed to defend against Dark Creatures like vampires? Screech a

bit and spit on them? No wonder she won't let us practice magic – she's a Squib!"

"My dear Dolores – you don't mind if I call you Dolores, now do you?" Ignoring the incoherent sputtering and the spittle threatening his immaculate attire, Edgar wagged his finger playfully at her. "Really, now, how pedestrian of you to call me a bloodsucker. I am a trained barrister, dear Dolores, and I am here as counsel to Mssrs Fred and George Weasley. Perhaps you haven't seen my card?"

With a tiger's smile, Edgar handed over a magical card. The words Edgar Celer, Magical Counsel were written in elegant crimson script against a white background. Interspersed between the lettering were streaks of dark red ink that seemed to flow in and out of ruby red circles strongly reminiscent of drops of blood. The reverse side had glowing white letters set in the flat black base providing the address of the legal offices in Diagon Alley.

Dolores crushed the card contemptuously; her entire body shaking with rage. Edgar smiled and flagrantly flaunted his fangs. "I am a professional bloodsucker, Madame. " With a flash of a dark smile, Edgar took two steps closer as Umbridge quickly took one step back. Halfway through her second backward step, she paused as a glassy expression settled over her eyes. Edgar's voice took on a surreal quality of power, faintly echoing in timbre. "Really, Dolores, tell me how you feel."

Umbridge's face broke out into an intoxicated leer, her voice cloying and saccharine. "I'm so happy to meet you... so happy..."

Harry watched with amusement as Edgar flicked his eyes to Dumbledore who was slowly rising from the table, the Headmaster's face showing his concern. Clearly, Dumbledore was not about to let this continue. Harry looked around and saw that most of the females in the area were slowly losing control of their jaws as their eyes were equally vacant. Hermione was already out of her seat and seemed ready to climb over the table in order to get closer to Edgar. Only two women seemed to be completely unaffected. One was Professor McGonagall, who was looking contemptuously at a fully Enthralled

Professor Trelawney. Ginny Weasley was the second, and she had stuffed her fist in her mouth in order to keep from laughing aloud.

“Am I evil, Dolores?” The whisper reverberated as it spread through the hall, almost matching the heartbeat of everyone that heard it.

“Never,” she breathed as her face further distorted into an expression of fawning adoration. Unconsciously, she was walking toward Edgar, her head slowly tilting to the side to expose her soft, flabby neck. “You could never be anything evil...”

Abruptly Edgar took one step back, and Umbridge stopped cold. Hermione froze and then blinked in confusion at finding herself with one foot on the table and one foot on the bench seat. Various other girls were half-standing or already headed in Edgar’s direction. The greatest impact had been on the girls in closest proximity to Edgar. They appeared to have been fully mesmerised and they still gazed blankly at him for several seconds, even after he had lifted the Enthrallment. Dumbledore was watching them with a cool gaze, his wand out but aimed nowhere in particular.

Edgar casually returned to studying his fingernails and adopted an icy tone. “So I could never be evil, then, Madame?”

Umbridge looked in horror at Edgar and then at all the other students, who were watching her closely. Before she could fully react, Edgar waved his hand vaguely in a banishing motion. “Now, unless you wish further demonstration of some of my more interesting abilities, I bid a good day to you.”

And with that, he unceremoniously dismissed her. Edgar glanced at Harry then placed a hand on each twin’s shoulder and alternately pulled and pushed them out of the Great Hall, leaving the non-entity fuming behind them. Most of the students leaned back as Edgar walked past them, as if they expected their bodies to be violated without notice. The girls all looked slightly embarrassed and there were more than a few who were blushing hotly. Harry was amused to note that there were still some girls who stared after Edgar with something like longing in their eyes. After Edgar left, most of the boys

were either somewhat puzzled or faintly amused, with a smattering of jealous eyes mixed in.

Harry followed Edgar, contentedly replaying the memory of a thoroughly hacked-off Umbridge frightened silly by a pair of fangs. As far as Harry was concerned, this was prime pranking material, and all he needed was a stock of the necessary ingredients.

Psychological warfare was what made pranking so much fun in the long run. While Harry only played the joke or five on friends, enemies were treated to a much different type of prank in order to effect the desired behaviour modification. While the outcast wizard Pavlov was a bit over the top with his attempts to prove mental manipulation and conditioning was possible without use of Unforgivable Dark magic, Harry thought that even an old dog like Umbridge could learn new tricks when sufficiently motivated. Lacquered brain and all.

Once they all reached the corridor outside the Great Hall, Harry suggested they move off to the twins' little secret hideout where they could all work out any needed details. Edgar fell in step beside Harry as the twins led the way, only occasionally looking back over their shoulders with a bit of nervousness at the close proximity of a vampire.

“So,” Harry offered quietly, “light brown, eh?” Edgar pointedly ignored him. “That wouldn’t be very scary. Sounds like some old-fashioned hair dye might fix that right up to me.” Edgar gave Harry a frosty glance before walking more quickly to catch up to the twins right as they headed down into their secret lair. Chuckling under his breath, Harry whistled *It’s a Small World* as he closed the portrait behind him and conjured his own recliner. Edgar was still giving Harry an icy front while he regarded the twins who were sitting before him.

“Very well, Harry,” Edgar said glacially, “let’s proceed. My services have been retained by Mr Harry James Potter to work on several projects, and I was recently informed that he would like me to consider taking on a pro bono case for Mr Frederick Weasley and Mr George Weasley. That means that my services would be free to you



gentlemen.” Harry merely smiled, letting Edgar tell the story the way he chose to.

Fred and George were still a bit nervous but seemed rather excited at the prospect of having a solicitor free of charge.

“Harry,” George whinged, “is there anything you can’t do? Cook? Clean?”

Harry smirked back and put his chair in full recline mode, his hands behind his head.

Edgar snapped his fingers to regain the attention of the twins. “Now then, I understand you wish to bring charges of unfitness for teaching against a professor here. What evidence do you have, and how can you ensure its authenticity?”

Fred excitedly pulled out the sensory monitor Harry had given them the prior week. Harry watched amusedly as Edgar feigned surprise and then proceeded to carefully determine if the monitor had been tampered with. “Very well,” he finally announced, “I will need sworn statements from both of you. Let me draw up some paperwork. Mr Potter, do you wish to be a party to this action?”

Harry shook his head. “No, thanks, I’ve got more than enough balls in the air as it is.”

Edgar nodded. “Very well, then I must ask you to please leave us. I promise not to harm your colleagues, if you have any concerns in that direction.” Harry glanced at Fred and George, but they just shrugged. Apparently their faith in their fake Dark Lord was sufficient for them to be going on with.

Harry rose and Vanished his recliner. “Right, later gents!” he called on his way out of the portrait. As Harry proceeded back to the Great Hall, he knew he had a couple of hours before he was supposed to accompany Dumbledore on some investigation into the past life of the man of many Riddles. He decided he was in no mood to sit inside and deal with the whims of others. Glancing out the windows, Harry

saw that the brooding grey sky had finally yielded and that rain was now lashing the castle.

Despite the downpour, the great outdoors beckoned to Harry, and he quite enjoyed the feel of the cold wet rain beating on his skin and clothing as he trudged to the path around the lake. Since he was never certain whether or not he would get another chance to experience these sensations, Harry always took whatever opportunity he could get to enjoy things, even the sometimes inclement weather that Mother Nature liked to provide.

He ignored the discomfort of his completely soaked clothes while he completed his walk around the lake. As he neared the entrance to the castle, Harry saw a figure coming out of the doors into the rain, stomping and splashing heedlessly through the mud and muck.

It was either an incredibly irritated person or one who loved nature in all its forms.

Harry stopped to watch the mysterious figure head directly for him. As the person came nearer, he recognised Ginny's vibrant red hair and short but slim stature. A bit of parchment was clutched tightly in her hand.

She stomped right up to Harry, and he was slightly taken aback to realise that her hair was so discernable because it was completely dishevelled, even sticking out in great clumps in some areas. Harry had never seen her looking so unkempt. He was a bit surprised at himself – he rarely bothered to remember little details of appearances. With Ginny, he knew it was sometimes in a thick plait, sometimes it flowed loose on her shoulders, and sometimes it was tied back in a ponytail, but Harry knew that it was always neatly arrayed. He was also a little shocked to see that Ginny also appeared to have a nice shiner forming under her right eye and that blood was trickling down from the corner of her mouth.

Before he could ask what had happened to her, she was shaking her fist in his face, the parchment held tightly in it. "Teach me!" she commanded Harry.

“What?” Harry’s mind was focused entirely on the trail of blood as it slowly wound its way down her chin. There was something horribly fascinating about it.

“Teach me how to fight!” Ginny grabbed Harry’s robes with her free hand and clutched them fiercely. “Teach me now!” There was a distinct fire to her gaze and attitude that left Harry wondering just how many different Ginnys were contained in that lithe body of hers.

Reaching out and casually breaking her grip, Harry then pried the parchment out of her fist and glanced at it. A rather surprisingly detailed map of the castle and nearby grounds was on it, with little dots moving around and names on each dot. “So you’ve got it,” he muttered, looking up at her. Ginny was still glaring at him, but now her eyes were no longer hot with ire but appeared wet with frustration.

Harry held up his other hand, palm out. “Tell me why you want me to teach you. You never answered my question from the train ride.”

Ginny’s voice quavered a little. “What does it matter? Do I ask you why you do what you do?”

Harry raised one eyebrow. “I’m not asking you to teach me how to kill people, which is what you’re asking of me. I’m asking you why I should.”

Ginny’s brown eyes were inscrutable as she stared at him, leaving Harry confused as to whether she was commanding or pleading with him. “I’ll talk about it when I’m bloody well ready to, and not before! Will you help me or not?!” she finally snapped.

Harry decided then and there that she was definitely commanding.

He stared back at her for a long moment as Ginny valiantly wiped off the water all over her face with a sleeve that was slowly becoming soaked through. Harry was striving to look past the lone tear that streaked down her pale face despite her best efforts. She refused to take her eyes off him, and her look was openly a challenge. Although the rain and her sleeve work had washed away most of the blood, her

bottom lip was still stained a dark red and was beginning to swell. Her hair was plastered against her head, the usually vibrant auburn colour dulled by the rain. Her brown eyes held neither offer nor command, but something else, something intangible.

Harry glanced down at his watch and realised he had at least another hour before he had to meet Dumbledore and Cyril. He briefly wondered what would happen if he refused to do as she asked. Something told him that this would probably not be a wise decision. Resigning himself to yet another strange situation in his life, Harry shrugged and met her gaze.

“Let’s see if you’re really willing to learn, and then I’ll decide. Ready?”

oOo oOo oOo

A/N:

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to Chreechree and cwarbeck. Thanks to random folks for lending their Brit-picking data, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

The tsuba is the patterned metal guard by the hilt on the samurai weapons. The kissaki is the sharp and pointy tip.

## Chapter 15: Revelations

Ginny pushed her wet hair back from her face. "What do I need to do?"

Harry smirked. "You need to start running around the lake."

"Around the lake?" Ginny gave him a look filled with disbelief. "In these shoes and in this weather?"

Harry shrugged. "Your enemies won't give you the chance to pick your clothes, the weather, or the place. Life happens. Adapt. Or die. Your choice." Without saying anything more, Harry started a brisk jog on the track around the lake, carefully folding the parchment and placing it into his pocket en route after a silent and discrete *Impervius*!

The ground was not particularly difficult to manoeuvre, lacking sufficient mud and debris to be inhibiting, but if Ginny really wanted to learn, she had to be dedicated, and the rain was sufficient for testing that. Dedication had no room for whimsy or desire. As a clever man once wrote, moods are for cattle and love play, not for fighting.

After a moment, Harry could hear Ginny's muttering accompanied by the sounds of her feet squelching through the slight muck as she ran to catch up with him. She eventually managed to match his pace, and Harry resisted the urge to grin as she struggled to keep her sodden hair out of her face. Ignoring the glares she was shooting at him, Harry looked up and enjoyed the strange beauty of the grey sky and the feel of the lashing rain which poured down. It was cold and unpleasant but nothing his body would fail to deal with one way or another.

After nearly two minutes of a respectable jog, Harry glanced over at Ginny. She was staring grimly at the ground, her brow furrowed deeply. He noted that her breath was already coming in uneven gasps. Harry shook his head. She had asked for this, even though she had no clue what she had really been asking for.

Harry barked out, "Stay with me," and promptly broke into a light run. He kept up the pace until they reached the halfway point around the lake. By this time, Ginny's steps were faltering. She was already out of breath and panting, but she determinedly tried to keep up with him. Harry's own body was unstrained by the activities so far, but Ginny was about to collapse. Slowing down to a very light jog, he waited until she was next to him again before he started speaking again.

"You never know when you'll have to attack or be attacked. Never wear clothes you can't fight in." Harry tried to get a clear look at her shoes. "Those are all right as shoes, I guess, but they have no traction and aren't flexible or supportive enough for training or fighting your way out of a sticky wicket. Wear something else."

Ginny's breathing was still so uneven that she did little more than grunt at him. Her energy was clearly flagging – her body was obviously unused to even moderate levels of exercise. Riding around on a broom might require some mild athleticism, much like the dubious sport of golf, but the training she sought required hard work.

Most people lived in a comfort zone, willing to do the minimum to maintain their level of comfort. Physical exercise almost always violated the comfort zone of people, especially steady, repeated, and quite vigorous physical exercise.

The truly advanced practitioners of Muggle martial arts all started before they were five years old. They trained extensively, and often brutally, for the rest of their lives in order to attain a level of mastery that others would ascribe to mere Hollywood-style special effects. Harry had seen both types, the paper tigers and the real tigers, and he knew that while he would never be the best, he would be far away and above what a couple of hours for two or three nights a week could achieve.

As Ginny continued to huff along and struggle in her unfortunate choice of shoes, Harry explained the real problem. "You want me to train you because you see me do something that I make look easy. What you need to realise is that you're making a request for years of training to reach this level, and you have to be completely dedicated to reach it. It will take nearly a year for your body to develop the

conditioning you need for even half of the things I do. This little jaunt around the lake is nothing, Ginny. You can barely do it. You probably would have quit already if I wasn't here. Are you willing to give up everything for this?"

Ginny's response was to glare harder at the ground and ignore the question. Harry was happy that she was opting not to curse him, literally or metaphorically, but he knew it was still too early to be real to her. She had no idea just how much it took to get to the point in training where a mere two or three hours every day was sufficient to maintain an edge. Harry himself needed to train four or more hours every day to move on to the next level, but he knew that this would not happen given his present schedule and the demands that life had dumped on him. Two hours or so was all he could afford at this point.

They were about three quarters of the way around the lake when Harry slowed down all the way to a brisk walk, giving her a chance to cool down and get her breathing under control. She was young enough that the abrupt beginning of her impromptu training exercise would not cause any lasting harm, but Ginny would hate him by tomorrow from the shin splints alone. If she was dedicated and willing, he might actually start to teach her, in which case he would instruct her on the proper methods for stretching, warming up, and cooling down. At the moment, though, he needed to see just how badly she wanted to learn.

When they reached the exact spot where Ginny had accosted him, her breathing was coming in ragged gasps, and she was very red in the face. Harry watched Ginny gradually stop walking, tottering a little to one side but managing to keep upright. He suspected her legs were feeling a bit rubbery. He was surprised despite himself, as he knew most people in the magical world eschewed physical labour, and few pushed themselves hard to maintain any kind of reasonable shape. He had frankly expected her to give up before they made it to the half-way point.

"Right, now that you've had a little bit of a warm-up, I've got a little exercise for you." Harry smirked to himself. Ginny would want his head on a platter for what came next. "Put your hands in front of you, like this." Harry extended his forearms at a forty-five degree angle

relative to the ground, his elbows pointing downwards and at a slight distance from his hips. His hands were half-closed, and neither arm crossed the other. This was one easy starting point for either defence or offence, something that had only become natural to Harry after more than a year of training.

Once Ginny was in a reasonable facsimile of his posture, Harry slightly bent his right leg, short of locking the knee. As Ginny copied him, Harry grinned evilly. With his stance not changing the slightest, he lifted his left leg and held it straight out in front of him, parallel to the ground. Ginny tried to copy him but fell over into the wet and muddy ground. She groaned for a moment then resolutely rose to her feet. Paying no heed to Harry, she rapidly got set back into position and laboriously dragged her left leg into the air in front of her. Her left leg wobbled a bit once it was out there, but she was able to hold her posture with only a mild bit of wavering of both legs.

“Right, what we’re going to do next is called a ‘diver’.” Harry kept his extended left leg parallel to the ground and slowly bent his supporting right leg until he was all but sitting on his right heel. His left leg was still perfectly horizontal to the ground and a few inches above it. Harry then gradually stood back up to the point just before his knee locked straight, the extended leg never wobbling. “You try one.”

Harry knew better than to laugh as Ginny struggled and almost fell over a couple of times as she tried to work out how to make her body perform the move. As she got near the bottom, her right leg crumpled, and she sat down hard in the mud. Harry waved it off with a grand gesture. “Since you can’t go that far yet, just stop right before you find yourself sitting down.”

Ginny got up and tried again a few times before she found the distance she could drop without collapsing. Harry watched as she slowly rose back up. After finally completing one diver exercise, both her supporting and elevated legs were shaking visibly. “Excellent!” Harry said. “Now do that forty-nine more times, then switch legs.”

Ginny stared at him in shock, and her eyes began to sparkle with angry fire. Harry cut her off just as she opened her mouth to start cursing him. Shaking his head quickly, he pointed to the doors of the



castle. "Do it, or go back to the others and whatever you're running from," he said coolly.

Ginny shut her mouth with a snap and glowered at him. As she toiled through almost fifteen more divers, Harry was treated to the very colourful vocabulary that Ginny managed to come up with in describing Harry and his apparently twisted version of a good time. Harry watched impassively when she collapsed in the mud on the fifteenth diver. "Your body is trying to tell you it can't do any more. Don't listen to it. Get up. Switch legs. Keep going."

Gritting her teeth and panting from all her efforts, Ginny gradually rose to her feet. Neither of her legs was stable, and both were shaking like a leaf in the wind. She was clearly doing her best to ignore her body's slow betrayal to her mind, but this time she fell down before she could complete even five divers. "Your body thinks it can rest by failing. Failure is not an option. Failure is death. Get up. Switch legs. Go." Harry folded his arms and stared down at her.

Ginny looked like she was ready to cry. She got up shakily and forced herself back into position, switching legs yet again. Before she reached four, she was again on the ground, her clothing now a uniform muddy brown. "I can't," she panted as she lay on the ground. "I'm not in good enough shape."

Harry shook his head. "Push-ups. Let's go." Ginny groaned but rolled over and did her best to copy the ramrod straight posture Harry was displaying. "Hands in front of your shoulders, feet together, on the balls of your feet, chin up, look in the distance, slowly down to just before you touch the ground, slowly up, no fast bouncing moves. Go." Without even trying, Harry shrugged off fifty push-ups before standing up. He kept an eye on Ginny as she fought her way through a few, doing her best to keep her posture.

As much as he hated to admit it, Harry was impressed. She was doing a lot better at this initiation than Harry did when he received it. He had tremendous respect for the fact that she kept her posture and sacrificed speed and quantity for quality. It was one of the subtle signs that would distinguish someone who would give their all from someone who just went through the motions.

Ginny finally collapsed face down into the mud again. To Harry's amusement, she carefully rearranged her mass of hair into a pillow of sorts and rested her head on it. She was looking at him with a mixture of resignation and fear, knowing that she was only on the tip of the journey into hell that Harry held in his pocket. Before Harry could tell her to roll over and start some crunches, the castle doors opened, and a tall figure in blue robes carrying a pink umbrella came walking toward them.

As the figure drew nearer, Harry realised that the umbrella appeared to be similar to the paper umbrellas found in Muggle cocktail drinks, although from the looks of it, this one had been hit with multiple Engorgio spells, and at least one Impervius as it kept the rain off without disintegrating. The Headmaster obviously had a seriously deranged sense of humour. Cyril had warned Harry that, though his Mentor had been but four years behind Dumbledore in Hogwarts, the Headmaster had already earned a reputation for being quite a bit of an oddity by the time Cyril met him.

Ginny, however, looked with what could only be described as utter adoration at Dumbledore's interruption. Harry suspected she would have been grateful to Voldemort himself if it would have resulted in her being saved from any more physical torture.

"Mr Potter," Dumbledore greeted him solemnly, although his eyes were twinkling merrily. "I trust today is finding you well."

Harry nodded politely. "It's a glorious day to be alive and outside, Headmaster."

"Ah, I suspect not everyone is as fond of the day as you are, Harry." Dumbledore looked at Ginny lying in the mud. He showed no reaction other than a faint twitch of his lips. "I'm sorry to interrupt your discussions, Miss Weasley, but Mr Potter has a prior engagement this afternoon. I thought you might excuse Harry a bit early so that he could get cleaned up before we meet."

Ginny looked absolutely delighted and waved a nonchalant, albeit weary, hand in the air. "Of course, sir." Ginny paused to let her arm drop to the ground with a wet squelch. "As much as I was enjoying spending such quality time with the dashing Mr Potter over here, if you need him, please, do take him." Her sarcastic tone was only slightly marred by the exhausted warble of her voice. After panting for a second, the glint of fire was back in her eyes as Harry watched her try to collect her dignity from the mud. "I shall try not to miss him too much. Although I dare say that, for his part, he will miss me terribly."

Harry rolled his eyes a bit before nudging her shoe with the tip of his boot. "Right, be out here tomorrow morning at ten sharp, Gin-Gin. We'll see how you do after a day of rest." Ginny groaned again and remained motionless. Sighing at her dramatics, Harry reached down and hauled her to her feet. She swayed slightly but got her body mostly under control. Nevertheless, she let Harry keep one hand on her upper arm while he guided her inside, taking on an air of tolerance, as both of them followed in the wake of Dumbledore. Harry knew that she would collapse if left to her own devices, and he tolerated her humour in turn to get her inside, where she could make her own way forward. Or into unconsciousness, as she chose.

They finally reached the inside of the castle despite Ginny's repeated stumbles as she climbed the short stairs to the entrance hall. Pushing through the doors, Harry carefully led her to a stone bench, saying nothing of her body's state. Ginny promptly slumped down on the cold stone, looking half-dead for the entire world to see. Harry glanced up to see Cyril exit the Great Hall. He looked around for a moment before joining Harry and Dumbledore.

"Is there a problem?" Cyril asked as though it was a perfectly normal occurrence to see such things as the muddy wreck that was Ginny Weasley.

"Not at all," Harry replied. "I think she found what she was looking for, but it wasn't quite what she thought it would be." With a cheery wave at Ginny, he ran up the stairs to change out of his wet clothes, regretting that he had not thought to have his broom on him.

By the time Harry arrived back in the entrance hall, this time on his broom, Fred and George were on either side of Ginny, propping her upright in between them. The twins were interrogating her on how she had managed to achieve such a woebegone state. Dumbledore and Cyril were standing by the entrance doors, gazing into the rain and quietly talking, probably of days long gone, something Harry had caught them doing many times over the past few days.

Harry landed lightly and pushed his broom into the special case Sirius had made for him. He dropped the case into his bag and strapped it on his shoulder. As he passed by the Weasleys, he caught the tail-end of Ginny's monologue extolling all his loathsome and vile qualities. The normally jovial twins turned towards Harry with identical frowns marring their faces. "What did you do with our sister?" George demanded.

Harry looked searchingly at Ginny. He thought there might be a hint of a challenge in the way that her chin lifted and her brown eyes defiantly glared at him, but she was still mercurial enough that he was uncertain if he was imagining it.

"Nothing she didn't ask me to," Harry calmly replied. He ignored the scowls that appeared on the twins' faces and gave Ginny a sardonic salute before walking over to stand with the Headmaster and his Mentor.

Dumbledore turned as Harry approached. "And are you ready then, Harry?" The two elders led Harry to the centre of the entrance hall. Dumbledore reached into a deep pocket in his robes to withdraw a rather worn and beaten tea cup. "If you would both touch this, we'll be off."

Cyril immediately placed one finger on the rim of the cup, but Harry hesitated. "Er, Headmaster, what's the situation like where we're going? Is it friendly or not?" Cyril looked sharply at Harry before raising one eyebrow at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore paused for a moment before answering. "I do not know, Harry." At this, Cyril and Harry both drew their wands. As Harry reached out and laid a finger on the rim of the cup, he noticed that all

three of them had the same garments on under their clothing, the bits peeking out from under the long sleeves.

“Harry?” Ginny called out quietly.

Harry glanced at her while Dumbledore gave the cup a light tap with his wand.

“Why are you all wearing dragon-hide armour?”

Harry was faintly surprised that she had noticed, but as the Portkey had already been activated, he merely winked at her before they all disappeared with a jerk behind the navel and a soft pop!

Harry kept his knees bent as he landed and promptly spun in a fast circle to get a bearing on their location before spinning a second, slower time to look for magical signatures. They appeared to be on the thinning edge of a small forest that spanned a few acres, and they were currently standing in the middle of a path to a small stone cottage in the distance. The small forest appeared to be a boundary on the slight hill upon which they stood, looking down over a village nestled in the valley below them. There was a manor-style house on the hill opposite them on the far side of the valley. A small river or large stream flowed through the valley, but it seemed to be a fairly rural area all in all.

When Harry relaxed and put his wand away, Cyril and Dumbledore both copied his actions. “I take it you see nothing of consequence, Harry?” Cyril asked.

Harry shook his head. “There’s a flux line near here, down the hill a little, but otherwise I can’t see anything magical of note.”

Dumbledore regarded Harry for a moment. “That does help me understand a bit more,” he said quietly. Gesturing toward the stone cottage, Dumbledore motioned for them to begin walking. “We are approaching the house that was the last dwelling place for the once mighty Slytherin family. At the time of their end, the last remaining descendants of Salazar Slytherin were the members of the Gaunt

family, pathetic paupers clinging to what little dignity they had left, without their money, and all of them suffering from the genetic consequences of inbreeding and delusions of grandeur. Their once vast estates and social networks were reduced to ashes and bitter-sweet memories.”

It was all Harry could do not to roll his eyes at Dumbledore’s elaborate phrasings. As Dumbledore continued to tell them the story of the Slytherin family, the trio slowly walked down the path. Harry and Cyril repeatedly scanned the surrounding environs, listening to the sad story. Their entire history was dismal – the bad investments, the absolute and unswerving belief in blood purity to the point of inbreeding, and the abuse toward their own children all contributed to the inevitable demise of the once-powerful Slytherin name. Dumbledore mentioned that he never understood why the Gaunt family chose to live so close to a Muggle village when their money and power ran out, given their open contempt for Muggles. The presence of the flux line explained much in that regard, considering how it would alter the abilities of everyone nearby who had magical talent.

Harry was of the private opinion that, had the orphaned child of Merope Gaunt been raised by his true family, the entire Voldemort situation could have been completely avoided. The constant abuse and criticisms would have probably turned a young Tom into a bitter and shallow individual with a crushed spirit and only vague dreams of forgotten power and knowledge in the glory days of history. Instead, they had a bitter and powerful Riddle whose unchecked ego and vengeful spirit drove him relentlessly to pursue his aspirations of world domination.

Harry thought that the fact that Tom Riddle was the final descendent of Slytherin made no difference at all. It was tantamount to pointing out that Harry was a descendent of the mythical Adam and Eve – it was inconsequential, to say the least. Only Voldemort’s pride and ego, and the fact that most of Wizardkind were so easily impressed with bloodlines, made his connection to Salazar Slytherin one of his most feared qualities.

As they reached the area just outside the low, rotting wooden gate leading into the now-wild cottage garden, Harry held up his hand, stopping Cyril and Dumbledore from going closer. Harry squinted a little as he looked around. "It looks like the flux line runs straight through the house – in the front door, and out by the chimney. It's close to the surface, maybe twenty feet underground. It's in line with this gate, too."

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "That would make defending the house remarkably easy."

Harry continued to look around, his eyes half-closed. If he turned his head quickly side to side, he could almost see a flicker of something around the house, almost as if it was somehow linked to the low stone wall running around the property. "I think there are some wards here," Harry said quietly. "There's some kind of magic on the wall and the house."

Dumbledore surveyed the area around them before rapidly firing off three Notice-Me-Not charms to keep any Muggle eyes averted. If anyone happened to be watching, they would barely notice the trio of interlopers simply fading into the background. Harry started walking around the edge of the property outside the wall. When he moved away from the blazing energy by the flux line, he could just about make out an intricate network of wards around the property, linked in mid-air to runes, some of which Harry was unable to recognise immediately. He knew that Remus had more knowledge of wards and procedures around them than the limited bits Harry had learned about, but he also knew that Remus and Dumbledore were not on friendly terms at all.

After one complete circuit of the property, Harry returned to stand next to Dumbledore and Cyril, who were each casting various detection charms on the property. "Did you learn anything?" Dumbledore asked, pausing from his efforts.

Harry shrugged. "There are wards here. I don't recognise them. Do you?"

Cyril looked at Harry carefully. "How many did you find?"

“Uhm, maybe a couple of dozen. I wasn’t counting exactly.” Harry smiled a bit sheepishly, but Cyril just exchanged a long look with Dumbledore.

Dumbledore nodded, and Cyril turned back to Harry. “We cannot detect any magic on the house. Moreover, we cannot detect the presence of the flux line under the house. You are certain of what you see?”

Harry scratched his head for a moment. “I believe so. Before your little aura masking trick, I had no idea that was possible, but I’ve never been wrong otherwise. The flux line is just too big to hide or to fake. Can you detect it back by where we came in?”

Cyril blinked once, abruptly Apparating away with a pop!

Before Harry could make a sarcastic comment about it, a second pop! announced his return. “Very good, Harry. As you said, it’s quite large, and quite close to the surface.”

Dumbledore absently stroked his beard. With a few complex twists of his wand, a large sheet of parchment appeared with a Never-Out Quill. Harry rolled his eyes at the materials, but grabbed them before they fell to the ground. “Would you please sketch what you can see, Harry?”

Having immediately anticipated the question, Harry had already begun a much slower circuit of the house, trying to draw each side of the house and the web of magic around it. He made rough approximations on the edges of the parchment of those runes he could make out, indicating where each one was floating in mid-air and what lines connected to it.

When he finished, Cyril and Dumbledore studied the parchment and argued quietly over the possible meanings. After listening to the two men for nearly five minutes discussing whether a particular rune was ehwaz or eihwaz, and the implications for how the wards would work accordingly, Harry could take it no longer. He actually thought it was



iwaz, the focus for death, but their conversation was so reminiscent of Hermione and some Ravenclaw named Corner that it was like sitting through Charms with two geriatric students. "Look, there's a really simple answer to this," he interrupted them in a much sharper voice than he intended.

Dumbledore regarded Harry with an indulgent expression that was quickly erased at Harry's next words.

"First, it's iwaz, and second, Remus could do this in his sleep. Let me go and get Remus and bring him here. We'll have this solved in a trice, and you two can kip under the trees over there or argue about the evolution of runes or something."

Cyril was also frowning by now, but Harry really was uninterested in petty personal biases of old history or ancient history, be they Lycans or rune lore. Dumbledore clasped his hands behind his back and paced for a few moments. "And how is Remus these days, Harry?" the Headmaster asked quietly.

"Remus? Oh, he's fine. Quite nice and friendly." Dumbledore looked rather hopeful at that statement. "Of course, that's only when his family, real or otherwise, is not endangered through the malice, carelessness, or ignorance of others."

Ignoring the Headmaster's suddenly cool gaze, Harry turned to Cyril with a questioning look, but his Mentor shook his head in response. "I have no qualms with it, Harry, but Albus has legitimate concerns. A werewolf who knowingly risked infecting others once is hard to trust twice. That is a truth regardless of the actual level of danger for spreading lycanthropy that may exist in the situation at hand."

Dumbledore sighed before looking at the sky. "And you have spent years studying with Remus?"

Harry sighed in turn. "Look, he's been living in my house for over five years. He's never harmed anyone who wasn't a Dark Arts practitioner, and even then it was with great reluctance. The man wouldn't hurt a fly as long as no one is threatening him or those he holds dear."

Dumbledore took a deep breath. "Very well, Harry. Let us try this. Please invite Remus to join us if he would like to, and tell him I would... appreciate his thoughts on this problem we face." With a broad smirk, Harry swept his wand over himself repeatedly, and then flicked the tip of it sharply it at the Headmaster. All of the tracking charms previously on Harry were now firmly attached to the old man's shoes. Before Dumbledore could react, Harry Disapparated.

Harry decided it would be best to get Remus quickly and push forward some kind of tenuous truce rather than give Dumbledore any time to reconsider. Remus would be attracted to the problem like a fly to honey, but keeping Sirius away would be a bit tricky.

Luckily for Harry, Remus was at home alone. Sirius was off roaming in a park under the guise of a dog, but it was just a convenient excuse to recharge his core. Apparently there were things afoot at home, but Harry had little time to explore the goings on. Rather than try to convince Remus of anything, Harry just grabbed his arm and dragged him outside the disruption field before Apparating them both back to the spot in front of Cyril and Dumbledore.

Remus immediately stiffened when he recognised who was in front of them, but Harry cut him off before he could say anything. "Shut up, Remus. We need your help, and I didn't want to argue with you about it. The Headmaster asked me to ask you if you would consider helping us, and I didn't want to give you a chance to say 'no', so just deal with it." Before Remus could react any further, Harry smacked him sharply in the forehead and cast the Notice-Me-Not charm on his old friend.

Dumbledore and Remus promptly engaged in a staring match of sorts, while Cyril and Harry stood back and waited for the result. After what seemed an interminable period of time, Remus looked away and glanced around at their surroundings. "All right, Harry, since you dragged me out here into the middle of nowhere, what's going on?"

Harry briefly described what they were doing there and pulled out his sketch, handing it over. Remus shook his head. "You're telling me that you want my help to do a bit of burglary?"

Harry nodded his head while Dumbledore shook his. "Not at all," Dumbledore corrected Remus. "We just wish to see what's here."

Harry shot a look of dark humour at the Headmaster. "Ignore the doddering old man, Remus. We're breaking and entering, and snooping a bit as well, so it's definitely a spot of burglary."

As Dumbledore and Cyril tried to fill in all the details Harry had glossed over in his haste, Remus studied the drawing and looked around. Before Harry knew it, Remus was trying to point out that the rune was really ewaz while Cyril and Dumbledore presented their own interpretations. In order to break the wards down, they had to understand all the runes and how they fit together. Most were basic strengthening and shielding runes, but every complicated ward had a few controls that tied it all together. Breaking the controlling runes was the true art of breaking wards. Resigned to the fact that his help did not seem to be needed, Harry went for another walk around the property to get away from their rather vociferous discussions.

By the time Harry had returned, Cyril and Dumbledore were standing back and waiting while Remus cast spells all over the gate. Harry silently walked up to him, keeping one wary eye on the two old wizards. "So you won, then?"

Remus jumped slightly in surprise before turning back to Harry. "What? Oh, no. We all agreed to disagree, and they are letting me try my hand at the problem." Harry was relieved that all of them had apparently come to their collective senses.

"You know, Harry," Remus mentioned casually between spells, "Sirius is going to be irritated that you're doing a bit of rule breaking without him."

Harry chuckled softly. "No worries, Remus. We'll have this all settled shortly, and you'll be back before he notices. After all, it's not like

we're going to be duelling anyone in an old abandoned cottage, now is it? So Sirius wouldn't contribute much except as entertainment."

"You assume I won't tell him anyway, Harry." Remus laughed quietly before motioning for Harry to join him in another walk around the now-familiar property. Remus started asking questions and making corrections on the parchment as they moved along. They spent the better part of twenty minutes walking, elaborating, and sometimes arguing over a particular rune.

Upon closer examination, the rune they were all arguing about really was ewaz, or the focus for control in any form, but Harry would never admit that he favoured a different meaning.

"Bloody runes in wards. You make the line twice as thick, and suddenly it's a whole new thing." Harry continued grumbling as they finished the revised notes on the warding pattern. By the time they reached Dumbledore, he and Cyril came over to examine the parchment, whereupon Remus simply pointed to the new drawing of the rune in question.

Dumbledore and Cyril both shared a glance and looked a little disappointed that their most recent discussion was resolved with neither of them being correct in the end. It was equally clear to Harry that Remus was trying to act as though nothing was strange here, but the faint tightness around his eyes told him that his old friend was very uneasy being around Dumbledore again.

Before Harry could try to break some of the lingering tension, Remus turned to Harry and tapped his chin with the quill. "I think it's weak right here." Remus tapped the rune everyone had been in disagreement on. "If I bring in a new layer that overcharges too quickly, it ought to break the connection to the control and collapse it all."

Harry studied the diagrams for a moment. "You're risking a lot if you try that. Why not break this rune and then unravel it sideways?" Harry paused to tap one (which translated to 'time') at the back of the property.

Remus shook his head. As Dumbledore and Cyril looked on in amusement, Remus and Harry started arguing about different methods to break the wards, sometimes going so fast that their two elders opted to conjure up chairs to wait out a decision. It was apparent that Remus and Harry had argued over many other things in the past, as they had no apparent difficulty in sorting out ideas as they often ran over each other with their words or gestures. "Power sharing!" ... "Recharge too quickly, need to" ... "Blow up the" ... "backlash might really" ... "can't be broken" ... "shake the whole valley" ...

In the end, Remus apparently decided to short-circuit the argument. He whipped out his wand, looked at Harry and uttered the most dubious phrase ever stated. "Trust me!" Remus glanced a couple of times at the parchment, drew a deep breath and focused on the space where the rune should be floating in the air.

Harry looked sourly at the Headmaster and Cyril. "I just hate it when he says that."

After a few elaborate motions, Remus finished with a sharp pointing stab at the ground mid-way between the rune and the two major foci of the warding power anchored to the gate itself. Before anyone knew what to expect, the entire warding structure shot off a magical aura flare that caused Harry to fall backwards with a soft cry, one hand over his eyes.

Remus was instantly at Harry's side, asking him what was wrong. Harry sat there blinking repeatedly, unable to see anything at all. "Ugh, Remus, I can't see. Give it a moment. It was like the sun exploded in my face there." Shaking his head, Harry started gently rubbing on his eyes, periodically looking up to try and see. Remus kept up a litany of apologies while keeping one arm firmly around Harry's shoulders. Dumbledore performed a quick health diagnostic and told Harry that he could find nothing wrong, but that simple statement failed to assuage Remus' concern.

After nearly two minutes of flare-induced blindness, Harry finally had his vision back.

Dumbledore provided a hand to help Harry back onto his feet. "I'm glad you're alright, Harry. Normally I would have brought Severus with me for dealing with possible problems like this, but all things considered, I'm happy to have you three here to help instead."

Harry paused to dust himself off a bit before glancing around. On the surface, it appeared that Remus had indeed collapsed the entire ward structure. Resigned to one last walk around the property, Harry shook his head a bit before making his slow circuit. As he returned to his starting point, he gave Remus a look of profound disgust. "I hate it when you're right."

Remus made a show of buffing his fingernails on his shirt. Grunting in disgust, Harry turned around and pushed on the rotting wooden gate. As soon as he made contact with the material, the gate dissolved into brown dust, and the carefully neat low stone wall surrounding the property fell apart into a mixed pile of stones. Harry looked at Remus briefly before stepping over the mess and walking toward the cottage door.

Harry began a close study of the door into the cottage while Remus stood back and delivered an impromptu lecture which Harry did his best to ignore. Remus wound down with the gross oversimplification of his strategy. "All I really did was overload the two primary buffers, which in turn overpowered the controlling rune, causing it to fracture. For lack of a better phrase, the whole system just exploded at that point."

Cyril paled a bit before looking at Remus. "And what was the danger in that?"

Remus just shrugged. A lofty expression on his face, he vaguely waved his hand. "I'm an academic, practical considerations are uninteresting."

Harry snorted before turning back to face the trio of know-it-alls. "Academics don't practice, so practically, you're not an academic."

Remus scowled but suddenly winked at Albus and Cyril. "But the flux line was there, right, Harry?"

Harry glared at Remus. "Just because the flux line is much more interesting to think about doesn't excuse your method. If it hadn't been there, we wouldn't be here."

Conjuring a plain Muggle exercise book and basic ballpoint pen, Harry began another sketch of the intricate wards guarding the entrance to the cottage proper. Remus stepped up to look over his shoulder, asking Harry to clean up a few bits and expand others. As Remus and Harry started to argue again in their rapid-fire rhythm, Harry absently noted that Cyril and Dumbledore had walked back to stand by the fallen wall and started poking at it while discussing theories about the sudden collapse.

As Harry and Remus started arguing more loudly, however, the two older wizards returned to investigate the cause for the commotion.

"No, it will explode!" Harry was peeved with Remus for trying to strong-arm him twice in a row.

"Of course it won't!" Remus yelled back. "The flux line is still there, right?"

Harry shook his finger in the werewolf's face. "This isn't a buffer, Remus, it's an active defensive buttress! If you take away what it's pushing against, it's going to explode outward!"

Remus apparently grew tired of Harry's argument and whipped out his wand again. As soon as Harry saw the wand, he dived to the ground away from the door. Harry's sudden evasive actions caused both Dumbledore and Cyril to scramble away into their own protective dives. Remus engaged in a vigorous application of multiple cutting charms to excise the physical locations in which the door protections were anchored. Before he could even get half way through his work, however, there was a loud rending noise, and the door exploded outwards, knocking Remus back nearly ten feet.

Harry was the first to Remus' side, flicking his wand to clear the debris off the now moaning man. Remus' left arm was lying in a crazy shape, clearly broken in at least two locations. He was bleeding freely from his forehead. "Harry?" he asked weakly.

"What's wrong, Remus?" Harry asked anxiously, still trying to clean off the debris and check him for wounds. Dumbledore and Cyril both started a series of diagnostic spells.

Remus grunted when Harry got a little exuberant in cleaning out a cut on the man's right leg. "Harry, I hate it when you're right."

Harry stopped for a moment before laughing outright. "That's the least of your worries, Remus. Just hold still a minute." Harry looked up at Dumbledore expectantly. "What's the verdict?"

Dumbledore motioned Harry to get out of the way, and the Headmaster cast several charms on Remus. The werewolf cried out sharply as his arm straightened out and became encased in splints and wrappings to immobilise it properly. "It's too badly broken for me to do much about it, Remus," Dumbledore explained apologetically. "But this will make it easier to manage. I'm going to numb the pain now and stop all the internal and external bleeding. As the spells will only last for about an hour, I would like to take you to St Mungo's immediately."

Before Remus could respond, the Headmaster again cast several charms, at which point Remus' face relaxed. "Ugh," he muttered, "you said this will last an hour?"

At Dumbledore's nod, Remus sat up slowly, using his good right arm to prop himself. "Then I'm staying. I'm not leaving Harry here without my help. We've already established that this place is dangerous." Groaning a bit, Remus struggled to his feet while Harry stepped over to give him some aid.

Dumbledore gazed at Remus for a few moments. "I cannot recommend this, Remus. What if I take you to Poppy Pomfrey at Hogwarts? Would you get help then?"



Remus was clearly surprised by the offer, but shook his head anyway. "That's generous of you, Headmaster, but I need to be sure that Harry's all right before I leave. That means you need to tell me what you really came here to do."

Harry groaned in annoyance at Remus' stubbornness. "It's a horcrusty investigation."

Remus blinked. "A what?"

Harry sighed. "Horcrusty. Horcrux. You know. Like the diary. From our crusty Riddle maker. We're trying to learn more about our Riddles in order to find the crusties." Remus groaned again, although Harry was sure this time had nothing to do with physical pain.

"Right. Harry, I'm not leaving until you do." Remus tried to glare at Dumbledore and Cyril, but Harry was amused when his friend gave it up almost immediately as a bad job since it was obviously hard to be intimidating when covered in blood and with gaping holes in your clothing.

Shrugging his shoulders in defeat, Harry scooped up Remus' wand and inspected it briefly before thrusting it back into his friend's good hand. "Right then, let's wrap this up like Remus' arm, shall we?"

As Harry walked back over to the now open doorway, Cyril leaned over toward Remus. "Just how often is Harry right?"

Remus winced slightly. "A bit more often than I would like."

As the trio of mentors walked to stand behind Harry, who was firmly blocking what remained of the doorway, they gazed with frank curiosity at Harry and the dark interior of the cottage. Harry finally relented and stepped away from the entranceway. He scratched his head and stared at the sky. "This is weird. Something's definitely not right, but I can't tell what's going on in there. There's what would appear to be a layer of raw magic all across the floor, with no patterns or foci to indicate spells or intentional work. It's like something burst open and leaked all over the floor, like a pot of paint, except that instead of paint, it's magic. Raw magic, I think. Weird."

Cyril looked at Dumbledore and Remus, both of whom appeared as confused as he was, before he snapped his fingers to get Harry's attention. "Why is that weird?"

Harry was surprised at the question. "What's the first rule of alchemy? Like dissolves like. When magic energy is unbound, it groups itself into little streams and slowly gets collected back into the flux lines. This flux line below us, it should be like acting like a giant vacuum. I could probably cast a full-strength Stunner at you right here and, once it hit you, all the splash-over radiant energy would just disappear right through the ground." Harry jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the general direction of the cottage. "What's keeping that stuff bottled up?"

This caused the three to stare into the interior of the cottage. Harry watched as Remus rubbed his eyes, Cyril scratched at one ear, and Dumbledore toyed with his moustache. A sudden vision of the three Evil Monkeys flashed into his head, and he started laughing out loud, much to the annoyance of the others. To dissuade them from inquiring into the cause of his hilarity, Harry purposely began a debate by asking, "Any bright ideas, oh Learned Mentors?"

When the three predictably started discussing plausible hypotheses amongst each other, Harry sank to the ground, tossing his bag up against the cottage wall. He scooped up a handful of pebbles and idly bounced them off the wall of the cottage, above the bag. One pebble missed and sailed through the doorway, hitting the floor of the cottage. Harry was surprised to see the energy on the floor ripple like waves in a pond. "That's odd." Harry's casual statement stopped the speculations going on above him.

Harry threw another pebble into the room and watched the magic ripple across the floor again. He was so intent on pondering this strange phenomenon that he was startled when Remus loudly cleared his throat. "What's odd, Harry?"

Casting one final pebble and studying the resulting ripple effect one last time, Harry distractedly answered Remus. "Well, I can see nothing special or magical about these stones that I'm throwing, so

there shouldn't be any sort of reaction to them. But as you can't see what I can, it looks like the floor is responding to them as if they did have inherent magical properties."

As the three all stared pensively into the darkness, Harry continued throwing small stones in, trying to reach different areas. No matter where a pebble landed, a soft ripple rolled out from the impact point as soon as it hit on any part of the floor. Dumbledore finally straightened his shoulders and looked at the others. "I will enter. Cyril, Harry, please watch what happens inside in your own special ways. Remus, please observe the surrounding area to make sure nothing... untoward develops."

Taking a deep breath, the Headmaster stepped over the threshold. Harry watched the magic on the floor ripple in a much larger wave as it reacted to the larger mass that was Dumbledore's foot. When the Headmaster brought his second foot in, the waves initiated a destructive interference, making eddies of current and random patterns leap out. As Dumbledore slowly made his progress across the room, Harry explained what he was seeing to Remus and Cyril, who both confessed that they saw nothing out of the ordinary.

When Dumbledore reached the fireplace, he paused to light the tip of his wand, allowing everyone to see a massive and thick layer of dust over every surface, including the floor. As he carefully walked about the cottage, looking into cabinets and under furniture, Harry realised that the energy on the floor was dissipating. "Err, Headmaster, it seems like the magical energy is diminishing on the floor."

Dumbledore nodded. "As you say, Harry, like dissolves like. My use of magic in here may be breaking up the residue of whatever anomaly was left behind from many years ago."

Harry continued to watch until all the energy disappeared with no other untoward incident. "That's it, sir," Harry said, "there's none left."

Dumbledore returned to stand in front of the fireplace. "Very well. Since there seems to be no immediate danger, Cyril and Harry, please join me in here. Remus, if you would, please move into the

doorway and continue to keep watch outside. Let us explore what is here quickly. We can always come back later if need be.”

While Cyril interrogated Dumbledore on the back-history of the illustrious Tom Riddle, Harry began prowling around the small room, looking for anything of note or anything that stood out as unusual. He found nothing peculiar, except that he kept being drawn back to the fireplace no matter how far he wandered from it. His curiosity aroused, Harry deliberately set out to walk through the kitchen area. Instead of ending up by the back door as he originally intended, he found himself diverted to the fireplace once again.

Turning around, he waved to catch the attention of Cyril and Dumbledore and pointed at the moderate hearth and chimney behind him. “Err, it’s a bit weird, but no matter where I try to go, I keep finding myself walking back here. I don’t see anything strange, but I’m certainly being compelled to return. Have you noticed it?”

Exchanging intrigued looks, the two men started walking aimlessly about, but they too, found themselves gravitating back to the fireplace. “Most curious indeed,” Dumbledore commented, surveying the brick structure closely. He proceeded to cast several charms at the fireplace. At first, nothing seemed to happen, but then Harry abruptly let out an oath.

“Stop! Do that last one again!” Harry commanded Dumbledore, causing the Headmaster to frown at him and Remus and Cyril to raise amused eyebrows.

Dumbledore repeated the last detection charm, and Harry pointed to one particular brick set in the centre of the chimney, near Harry’s shoulder height. It was indistinguishable from all the other bricks around it. “This one. It lights up like a bonfire when you do that.”

For the next several minutes, Dumbledore and Cyril tried everything they could to make the brick to react more conspicuously, to no avail. When they appeared to give up, Harry tried a new direction. “I didn’t recognise whatever that detection spell was. What does it do?”

Dumbledore was idly rubbing his beard, apparently lost in concentration as he stared at the brick in question. "It locates living things," he answered Harry abstractedly.

Harry scratched his head. "Err, living things?"

Dumbledore looked solemnly at Harry. "Yes."

"This may be a dumb question, but is a horcrux a thing living or a thing not? What if one is in there?"

Dumbledore's eyes lit up like Christmas had come early. "That is a wonderful question, Harry. Is a soul a living thing? Do you think that a fragment of a soul would be living if the soul itself could be considered living? For that matter, does the charm detect the soul as a means to find living things, or is it based on—"

Dumbledore's theoretical ramblings were cut off when Cyril pointedly cleared his throat. "Perhaps this is not the best time to explore philosophy, Albus," he said wryly.

Dumbledore's enthusiasm died a little bit, but his eyes were still twinkling. "Very well, Cyril, but you simply must discuss this with me tonight over dinner." He turned his attention back to the brick. "Cyril, Harry, please join Remus back by the doorway. I am going to try something."

After the others had retreated, Dumbledore drew a small knife from a pocket and made a shallow cut along the side of his left hand. He rubbed the rapidly welling crimson fluid across the brick. With a soft pop!, the brick dropped out of the chimney, revealing a small hollow.

Without apparent thought, Albus reached his right hand into the hollow and extracted a thick ring, adorned with a black stone.

"STOP!" Harry shouted in alarm. The ring was glowing with power, bands of colours shooting between the ring, Dumbledore's bleeding hand, and the Headmaster's feet. "Put it down!"

Almost at the same time, Remus also cried out, his voice on edge. "There's something in the woods moving around! It doesn't look human!"

Dumbledore showed no reaction at all. The Headmaster appeared to be moving in slow motion as he brought the ring closer to his left hand.

"Albus!" Cyril's voice cracked through the room like a gunshot, surprising Harry with its underlying power. "I'll stop you if I must!"

Sweat beaded Dumbledore's brow, and there was a look of intense concentration on his face as his right hand shook severely in his apparent bid to halt its inexorable progression toward the left hand. Harry stared apprehensively as the raw magic engulfed the Headmaster, and then, realising the inherent danger of the situation, he whipped out both wands and aimed two Stunners at the centre of the Headmaster's chest. Cyril's own wand was arcing forward, a bright green streak of magic flying at Dumbledore's head.

Remus called back again, this time with greater distress. "Whatever is out there, it's not alone!"

Each of the three spells hit Dumbledore dead on, yet they seemed to have no effect whatsoever. They seemed to be absorbed directly into the Headmaster's inert body before the floor itself buckled upward into a vast column of magic power.

Cyril was hurled through the doorway, crashing into Remus, and both of them landed in the garden. Harry was blasted into the kitchen table and knelt beside it for a moment half-stunned, unaware that half his shirt was in shreds and his armour was now rent in several places.

Harry heard Remus and Cyril moaning in pain, but he could not do anything except watch in horror as Albus finally, with trembling hands, slipped the ring onto his finger.

There was a sudden bright flash, and then Harry was left with the sickening realisation that his vision had left him.

He was now completely blind. Again.

oOo oOo oOo

A/N:

I know, that was a cruel place to stop.

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to cwarbeck and Chreechree. Thanks to Reg and random others for their aid with Brit-picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

The line about “moods” for cattle and love play is from Frank Herbert’s Dune, attributed to Gurney Halleck. An excellent book if you have not yet read it. (You can skip many of the rest.)

## Chapter 16: Choices

Harry started blinking furiously, his eyes watering from the flash.

His left shoulder was tender, and he could feel a nasty lump forming on the back of his head from where he had hit the table.

Harry realized that these minor details were the least of his worries. While he was unsure what had been the source of the bright flash, he found his vision returning much faster this time. Despite the large spots that still remained to cloud his vision, he could make out the Headmaster turning to face the door, his movements hauntingly odd.

Harry recognized Remus' distorted voice coming from outside, and Cyril was also faintly shouting out something urgent. Harry could not make out what exactly they were saying as his ears were still ringing from the impact of his head on the table.

Dumbledore headed for the doorway as Harry struggled to his feet, but then Harry was pitched sideways onto the ground, the floor tilting suddenly as his vision swam with red light. When he looked back up, he saw another spell fly from Dumbledore's wand just before Harry was thrown bodily into the wall. Harry's vision sharpened even as his right shoulder throbbed painfully, resonating with the intensity of his left one.

Through the haze of pain, Harry sensed that something was clearly wrong with the Headmaster, but it was beyond his ken for the moment. He once again attempted to rise to his feet but had no success.

Clearly dismissing Harry as a viable threat, Dumbledore turned and strode to the door. Exerting an enormous amount of effort, Harry somehow managed to stand and pull out his wands just as Dumbledore was throwing the first spell into the garden. Harry's first Stunner was off target, instead hitting the doorframe right above the Headmaster's head. A large chunk of wood was blasted out and would have fallen directly on top of Dumbledore, but he managed to conjure a large golden shield to block the debris. Harry's second Stunner immediately followed from his other hand and was on target,



but the Headmaster had turned quickly, causing the Stunner to hit the golden shield, ringing it like a bell.

Dumbledore replied with a string of curses that narrowly missed Harry as he reflexively rolled away from them. The curses continued in their fanning pattern and blew holes in the walls of the cottage. Harry could see waves of power radiating from the ring on the old man's left hand, seeping into the wound where he had sliced it open in order to gain access to the cavity behind the concealed brick. Concurrently, magical bolts were leaping like lightning from Dumbledore's feet and apparently feeding more power into the ring.

Harry's ingrained training screamed that, given the situation and being wounded as he was, he needed every advantage he could get or create. Harry rapidly cast a Banishing Charm at the man's head, causing Dumbledore to automatically raise the shield as a block, and the old man returned a fast Incendio around its edge in retaliation. The Headmaster's use of the shield as a barrier blocked his vision, which provided Harry's first opening for a counter-attack as he cast a second Banishing Charm on a nearby chair. The magnitude of the spell propelled it into the old man's legs, knocking him to the ground forcefully.

"Cyril!" Harry yelled as he rolled away from the fire that the Headmaster's curse had started. The flames were rapidly engulfing the kitchen wall behind him. "I could use a hand in here!" He let fly two Accio spells at the same instant, one on the chair now behind Dumbledore and the other on the man's wand.

Dumbledore regained his footing and firmly pulled his wand to his chest, safeguarding it from the Summoning Charm by interposing the golden shield. He did not see the chair that Harry had Summoned, however, and it smacked viciously into the back of his legs, forcing the old man to tumble backwards into it. The jet-black bolt of magic forming on the tip of the Headmaster's wand luckily went awry, and half the kitchen table simply disintegrated into fine sawdust from the wayward spell.

“You’re on your own, Harry!” Cyril’s voice trailed in faintly through the doorway. Harry could hear grunts and odd sounds coming from outside. Clearly Cyril was having a few problems of his own with tea time this afternoon, leaving Harry to his own devices. Thankfully though, the ringing in his ears was receding, although he still thought it sounded as though there was a fire engine in the distance racing his way.

As Harry realized he was well and truly stuck with a crazy old man, the Headmaster’s off hand reached into his robes as the man regained his feet. Somehow, Harry did not think that the man was going to offer him a sherbet lemon for once. As the golden shield abruptly disappeared, a wall of small flying objects shot out of Dumbledore’s wand. Harry dropped into a sideways backward roll to let the objects fly over his head. Knowing that a moving target was much harder to hit, Harry switched to a full side roll, but he still needed to erect a standard sphere shield to deflect another curse that Dumbledore sent his way.

Panting slightly, Harry shot off a tight pair of low-power charms of his own that no shielding spells would stop. The Headmaster’s eyes flickered in surprise when Harry’s spells arrived on target. The first spell caused his robes to warm considerably, and the second one compelled his beard to fly into his face and obscure his vision.

Harry quickly Disillusioned himself while Dumbledore was distracted with his beard. Crouching down, he fired a pair of additional Warming Charms at the Headmaster’s clothes. The small fire in the kitchen was now rapidly spreading to the rest of the dining area, and the smoke thickened as the temperature in the cottage steadily increased.

“Harry! Hurry up! We need to get out of here!” The fact that Remus’ voice was laced with pain and that he was actually verbalizing his spells told Harry that the situation outside the cottage was likely no better than what was happening inside.

Dumbledore had regained control of his beard and was scanning the room carefully, apparently ignoring the heat his robes were radiating and the sweat beading on his brow. It was clear to Harry that the ring

was influencing the Headmaster's behaviour, and the repugnant aura of the thing was gradually creeping up the man's left arm. Harry was terrified of what would happen when it reached the Headmaster's head.

Harry scanned the room, his mind rapidly devising and discarding several ideas on neutralizing the Headmaster without seriously harming him. The fundamental problem was that Dumbledore had age, experience, and repertoire on his side. All Harry had was a basket of craftiness and a painfully deep understanding of how magic worked. He had no desire to lose everything today because of some poor bit of a riddle left behind.

Harry found the opening he needed to go on the offensive when the Headmaster swivelled to cast bolts of pale-pink light around the room in a seemingly random pattern. Swiftly gliding away from the kitchen, Harry fired twin Banishing Charms in rapid succession and then rolled forward to close the gap separating himself from the Headmaster. The first charm hit the centre of Dumbledore's back, but the Headmaster was already conjuring a shield as if he had expected the attack. The second spell splashed harmlessly against it. Once again, Harry was disturbed to see that the Headmaster completely absorbed the first spell without any visible effect.

Harry switched the path of his forward roll to avoid the apparently unfazed old man, angling his course parallel to Dumbledore. He knew that his Disillusionment would not hold perfectly, as the camouflage magic took a little over one second to adapt to the area, making it mainly useful for either motionless targets or scenes that changed little when used up-close. Indeed, even as he continued to roll forward, Dumbledore locked on to the distorted edges of Harry's shape and fired rapid curses at him. The first two missed, further demolishing the walls of the cottage, but the third one hit home.

Harry felt his entire right side scream in protest as he was violently hurled into an empty bookcase. Harry heard the wood breaking apart as shelves collapsed on top of him. Harry lay motionless, hoping the Headmaster would decide to leave his body alone as he had done before when he apparently thought that Harry had been rendered helpless.

“Harry!” Cyril’s distant voice floated into the cottage. Harry surmised that Cyril and Remus must be making their way into the woods and then swore sulphurously under his breath when his Mentor then commanded, “I am ordering you: Use Any Means Necessary!”

In the split second that Harry had concentrated on Cyril’s voice, Dumbledore had Transfigured several broken pieces of furniture into black-furred wolves, each of which was looking at Harry as though dinner was imminent. Deciding it would make little difference at this point, Harry rose to his feet and released the Disillusionment. As he stowed his right wand with a sharp flick of the wrist, Harry dodged to the side, then immediately vaulted backwards in mid-leap when Dumbledore cast a string of powerful Diffindo charms right where Harry would have landed, creating long trenches through the exterior wall behind Harry. As Harry came down from his reversal, a waiting wolf buried its teeth in Harry’s left leg, causing him to grunt a muffled curse.

The dragon-hide armour prevented the fangs from puncturing his skin, but the pressure of the wolf’s jaws would break his leg if he failed to quickly dislodge the Transfigured animal. Two other wolves were coming at him swiftly, and Harry knew that this situation was rapidly meeting his criteria for a pretty sticky wicket. Before Harry could move, he was hit in the chest by a deep-purple curse cast by Dumbledore. Once again, Harry was flung into a wall, this time it was the wall by the front door. His chest armour was smoking, and bubbles were rapidly forming on the outside. Harry’s involuntary scream had more to do with the blood running down his left leg. The first wolf was holding shards of dragon-hide armour in its mouth, its broken fangs lying on the floor between them or fragments of them embedded in Harry’s skin.

Striding towards a slightly stunned Harry, the Headmaster’s eyes blazed with an unholy glee. As Dumbledore raised his wand in what Harry knew was the beginning of a fatal spell, the entire cottage shuddered violently. The house was slowly collapsing due to the massive damage it had suffered in the course of Harry’s losing battle with the Headmaster.

With a rippling shimmer of magic and a loud crack! the Headmaster Disapparated.

At the Headmaster's disappearance, the wolves streaking toward Harry instantly shimmered back into broken fragments of wood which clattered to the floor. Harry barely had time to limp outside before the cottage finally toppled.

Harry could see Cyril and Remus at the edge of the tree line, sending curses into vague shapes moving about. They were both clearly rather bloodied, and Harry noted that Cyril had an arrow protruding out of his thigh, a recent decoration.

Dumbledore flicked into existence behind Remus. Cyril must have caught the motion out of the corner of his eye, as he turned and let loose a point-blank barrage of silver arrows straight at Dumbledore. The golden shield was back, however, and rang with the rat-a-tat-tat of solid-metal impacts, causing Remus to spin around. Dumbledore's wand immediately erupted with a sickly yellow curse, but Cyril dived to the side to avoid it and fortuitously also avoided three more arrows that came flying out of the tree line.

Dumbledore let fly immediately with a second yellow curse, this one aimed at Remus. As the unprepared werewolf crumpled silently onto the ground in mid-spell, Harry felt the loose chains which he normally kept on his temper shatter. Dumbledore flicked out of existence again, shield and all, with a faint crack!

Pulling out his katana with his right hand, Harry used his left wand to seal the blood coming from his leg. Pain is the focus, sharpener of the mind. Pain is always Master, the body the Student. Embrace Pain, Embrace Life. The droning litany faded into the background of his mind as Harry gathered his concentration.

Cyril arose in a rolling motion, limping heavily with the arrow embedded in his thigh now snapped off just above the flesh. Harry's Mentor fired a second swath of silver arrows into the tree line before turning to look for Dumbledore. Just as he turned back, Dumbledore appeared with another crack! directly behind Cyril and smashed him

in the head with the oversized shield, leaving Cyril an unmoving heap at the Headmaster's feet.

The air around Harry screamed in protest as the thunderclap of Instant Apparition placed Harry directly in front of Dumbledore, straddling the body of Cyril. As the Headmaster's wand came down in an arc toward Cyril, Harry's katana whistled through the air as he swept it in a hard reverse kesagiri, both of his hands driving the blade with all the force he could summon, sweat rolling off his brow.

At Harry's sudden reappearance, Dumbledore jumped backward and thrust his shield outwards to deflect the sword. Sparks flew from the impact between blade and shield just before the katana shattered the conjured shield. The blade angle deflected slightly upward from the impact, slicing through Dumbledore's armour like paper and skittering across the Headmaster's ribs, leaving a dark crimson trail of pain. A half-formed spell flew out of the old man's wand, causing a nearby tree to shake violently, as though caught in a hurricane.

Dumbledore quickly recovered his balance, and his aura began to radiate a tell-tale shimmer. Right before he Disapparated again, Harry finally laid his wand on the man's robes and Transfigured them. The sudden inrushing of air caused the old man's beard to whip wildly as the sweat was partially dried from both their faces. When Dumbledore reappeared a few steps away with a crack!, he immediately collapsed under the weight of all his clothing and armour, which Harry had transmuted to solid lead.

As a result of Harry's transmutation spell, the Headmaster's clothing and armour had become approximately seventeen times heavier, turning a tolerable twenty-four pounds into an unbearable four hundred pounds, trapping the man on the ground. Harry cast two full-power Stunners at the Headmaster as he lay supine and helpless, not really caring at this point if the old man survived the suffocating weight or not. All Harry could think about was getting to Remus.

He was already halfway to his friend when he heard several soft thrummm! sounds, triggering his mental reflexes, and he threw himself to the ground. A handful of arrows arced through the air that Harry had just occupied, plunging harmlessly into the earth.

Continuing into a rolling motion, Harry saw shadowy figures moving just inside the tree line. Whatever was in there appeared to be humanoid, but that was using the term loosely, as Harry realised when he took note of the large jackal heads grinning toothily at him from above furry bodies clothed in some kind of boiled-leather armour.

With a grunt of displeasure, Harry realized that Cyril and Remus had been fighting off a band of Cynocephaly Individually, they were no more trouble than a feral human or an overly intelligent but violent Grim, but in packs they could be something else. They were able to see heat signatures, so hiding was futile. At least they seldom had any sophistication in their weapons or skills. The primary problem was that a band of Cynocephs rarely numbered less than fifteen to twenty adults, which meant that their sheer numbers would wear you down before you could subdue them. As they generally preferred dark habitats, caves and the like, their presence so close to a Muggle town in broad daylight was distinctly unusual, despite the rare band that would raid human villages. Harry presumed that their behaviour was related to whatever was going on with Dumbledore, but explanations would have to wait until later.

A few more arrows shot out, but Harry was relieved to note that most of the band was already down, presumably due to Remus and Cyril's efforts. The throaty barking and grunting sounds indicated that the Cynocephs were angry but also scared and trying to work out what to do. Cyril was moaning and starting to come around, but most of Harry's worry was focused on the still silent and motionless Remus. He needed to get these idiot dogs out of the way.

With another thunderclap of Instant Apparition, Harry moved himself directly behind the remaining few jackal-men and unbound the magic in his core. The resulting wandless Stunner left him hot, drained, and breathing heavily, but the rolling magic wave knocked out the remaining four Cynocephs for the count.

Harry took a deep breath and hobbled his way towards a still motionless Remus and a moaning Cyril. He was only part-way there when he saw the Headmaster's form shimmer once again but in a different pattern. The old man stood up, his robes and armour now Transfigured from lead into a pure snowy-white cotton-like material.

Harry mentally groaned. Despite the proximity of the flux line, his magical core was severely drained after the wandless Stunner and two Instant Apparitions, and he was in no condition to continue a protracted fight.

Ever since the Headmaster had slipped on the ring, it had become more and more apparent that the shiny bit of metal had completely taken control of the old man's mind and had somehow magnified his already impressive abilities. This magical behaviour was in direct contradiction to everything Harry understood about magic. Dumbledore's initial ambush had placed Harry at a distinct disadvantage in this fight, and somehow, the old man was shrugging off Stunners, Banishing Charms, and everything else Harry threw at him.

The only thing that seemed to work was manipulation of the Headmaster's external physical state, such as Harry's modification of the man's clothing or hitting him with physical objects like chairs or the katana. More disturbing still were the distinct bands of power that continued to flow around Dumbledore, with the sinister aura of the ring now extending to just below the midpoint of his forearm.

Harry and Dumbledore stood facing each other, separated by nearly fifteen feet. The still form of Remus lay on the ground behind the old man, and Cyril was far enough out of the way to avoid being in any urgent danger. The entire scene reminded Harry of some bad spaghetti western film which featured the evil old man facing down the upstart young vigilante. The only thing missing was the whistling tune accompanied by the Spanish guitar, perhaps with a tumbleweed rolling by.

Harry kept his katana held firmly in his right hand, his wand loosely held in his left, concentrating exclusively on the Headmaster's shoulders, waiting for the subtle signs that would indicate which direction any movement would go. Whether magical or physical attacks were coming next was unclear. Sweat was slowly rolling down Harry's face. The dragon-hide armour makers really could learn a thing or two by studying Gore-Tex.



Whatever happened next, Harry knew that he had to retrieve the ring in order for it to stop influencing the Headmaster. As Cyril had commanded him, that meant using any means necessary, even if it meant the death of Dumbledore.

The sudden shimmering of Dumbledore's aura just before the old man would Apparate was one of the signs that Harry had been waiting for. Whipping his wand through a delicate dance, Harry hastily conjured up a projection of his own body to stand in his place. The illusion was a little fuzzy on the edges, but Harry just needed it to hold for a few seconds. He jumped back several paces just as Dumbledore's aura flared to a peak, and the man vanished.

As soon as the Headmaster appeared with a crack! behind the illusory Harry, the real Harry's katana whistled through the air. The old man tried to turn as the sound registered, but it was too late. The blade made contact and clinically separated his left forearm halfway to the elbow. As the forearm and hand were severed from the rest of his arm, Dumbledore's eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he dropped like a sack of potatoes to the ground. Blood spurted from the cut, the severed forearm lying about a foot away. Harry could still see the bands of power radiating from the ring, and the magical aura still pulsed malevolently around the now useless forearm.

Harry quickly picked up the Headmaster's wand and then used his own wand to cast a Bubble-Head Charm around the edge of Dumbledore's recently shortened left arm. Harry used the Charm as a tourniquet, forcing it to contract into a tight band until all visible blood flow stopped and the pool inside the charm no longer grew deeper.

Harry then turned his attention to the ring. Using a nearby stick to flip the forearm into the air, Harry encased it in a second Bubble-Head Charm, this one large enough to ensure that the arm could not make contact with anything else. Cautiously, Harry guided the floating limb onto the prone form of the Headmaster. When it failed to react in any way to the proximity of the old man, Harry sank to his knees and quickly tied it in place inside the snowy white robes, which were now stained in dark crimson. The Headmaster's breathing was ragged and shallow, and Harry was sure that he had little time left before the

accumulated trauma silenced one of the foremost figures of Light for all time – assuming, of course, that he was still of the Light.

Staggering back to his feet, he put his katana away and moved as quickly as his body would allow. Squatting beside Remus, Harry saw that his old friend was clearly still breathing, albeit very slowly. He tried to shake Remus awake. When there was no response, Harry tried to Re-energize his friend but had a difficult time casting the spell properly due to the insistent throbbing of his own damaged leg and back. His adrenaline and concentration were waning quickly, and he felt like he had been in the middle of a nasty car crash. He looked helplessly at Remus, recalling that the previous spells that Dumbledore had placed on the werewolf to limit his bleeding were only guaranteed for about an hour. Time was rapidly running out.

As Harry was racking his brains on how he could get Remus safely to medical aid, he heard his Mentor moaning and looked up to see Cyril slowly rising to a sitting position. Cyril was clearly in bad shape as well, bleeding from the head and leg and random other locations Harry could not quite make out. His Mentor, however, was coming around, and he would know what to do. Harry half staggered and half shambled to Cyril's side, absently grabbing the man's wrist to check his pulse.

Cyril started at the sudden contact but otherwise did not acknowledge Harry's presence. The head wound he had received from Dumbledore was still bleeding freely, but scalp wounds tended to do that. Harry was a little concerned that his Mentor was slow in tracking Harry's movements. Resigned to being the most functional one left, Harry leaned back and looked for ideas.

He knew he had to get all three of the older men to immediate medical care, or it was likely that one or maybe even all of them would die. Taking a deep breath, Harry tried to summon the bag that he had left next to the now collapsed cottage. When nothing happened, Harry tried the spell verbally. "Accio Bag!"

He was rewarded when the remnants of his book bag flew from the outskirts of the ruined house and landed beside him. It was smouldering in places and had a few impressive holes, but his broom

case was still inside and, thankfully, still intact. With a sigh of relief, Harry extracted the broom. Everything except the case was mangled to a fare-thee-well, so Harry thought nothing of ripping the bag to shreds.

In his drained and mildly confused state, it took several verbal attempts to get even Mobilicorpus to work, but eventually, Harry had Remus, Cyril, and Dumbledore tied to his broom, each gently bobbing in the air. The remains of his bag had made barely functional tethers for them, but it was all he could do for the moment. Holding his broom firmly with one hand, Harry slapped his watch Portkey with the other, and with four loud thumps, all of them arrived outside the Hogwarts Gates in a heap of bodies on the ground.

Harry groaned involuntarily as the pain he was experiencing reached new highs. The poor landing on his part caused him to fall on his broom, inadvertently resulting in impromptu bumper-car collisions between all of the tethered floating bodies and his own battered carcass laying on the ground. The end result was even more trauma for everyone between the battle, the Portkey, and the difficult arrival.

The rain at Hogwarts had not abated at all. It lashed against Harry's face as he fumbled to open the gates, squinting in the gloom that shrouded the valley where the castle lay. Whether the dark evening was due to the surrounding mountains or to the stormy grey skies, Harry did not know, nor did he have time to particularly care.

He was surprised to hear a soft moaning beside him. Harry quickly checked Remus over and, seeing that there was no change in his condition, he turned his attention toward his Mentor and was astonished to find the man's eyes opening slowly to look at the sky.

"Harry," Cyril called weakly, "what's the situation?"

"Ugh," Harry muttered, peering at Cyril in the darkness. "We're all bloody beaten up, that's what." Harry could not make out Cyril's face clearly despite its proximity. "Remus is in a bad way, and the Headmaster went completely nuts. I took him out, Cyril, but I don't know if he's coming back."

Harry moved to inspect the last tethered body, trying not to disturb the dangerous bundle inside the Headmaster's robes. "I've got to get Remus and the Headmaster inside to the hospital. D'you think you can help, or do you need to go with the luggage?"

Cyril slowly pulled out his wand and Harry watched his Mentor's arm waver for a moment. "I have to go to the Aurors, Harry." Cyril was spinning slightly, making Harry think his Mentor was far more likely to Splinch his way into St. Mungo's than successfully Apparate to the Ministry of Magic. "That place has to be dealt with."

Harry looked closely at Cyril as the man rocked back and forth slowly. "Right," Harry said. "Then before you go, get your body to stop floating, yeah?"

Cyril nodded in a rather strange way before moving his wand about. Harry watched as his Mentor, in fairly sluggish and sloppy form, flicked the wand a few times. Looking puzzled when nothing happened, he pointed his wand at his own head before staring down the length of it and repeating the sloppy pattern. With a shout of frustration, Cyril suddenly found himself rising higher, his limbs flailing as he revolved slowly in mid-air like a strange human balloon.

Chuckling, Harry climbed back to his feet. "Right, Cyril, you can run to the Aurors after a visit to the body shop."

Ignoring his Mentor's alternating commands and pleas for help, Harry took Cyril's wand away before he could do serious harm to himself or anyone else. After he made sure his Mentor was still tied securely to the Firebolt, Harry did the same for the other two, once again checking to see that the severed arm would not be inadvertently lost on the trip.

Harry slowly led the floating bodies through the gates, his free hand keeping a firm hold on Remus' robes. He paid no attention as Cyril began using even more colourful language to promise dire consequences for Harry. Once the gates were shut and secured, Harry climbed on his broom and flew as fast as he dared to reach the main doors to the castle. Cyril had suddenly gone silent, much to

Harry's relief, but he had to trust that his Mentor was still coping during the short flight.

Leaning down from the broom to kick the main entrance doors open, Harry barely registered that the Great Hall doors were wide open and that the entire school was eating dinner as he whipped past, flying straight for the hospital wing. A few shouts of surprise echoed in the hallway, but Harry did not have the time or the inclination to stop and be social.

Upon arrival in the hospital wing, Harry flew into the swinging doors, letting them slam open as the broom and its precious cargo shot into the room. As Harry reached the first bed, he gathered from the broomshaft all of the tethers on his old wizard body collection. Resigned to be using the remainder of his bag in such a manner, he wrapped the thin strips together around the corner post to keep everyone together. Cyril started moaning slightly again, but otherwise the area was silent. The dark room and silent, open door of the matron's office suggested that Madam Pomfrey was down at dinner.

Turning his broom around, Harry shot back down the stairs and straight into the Great Hall, ignoring the sudden silence that settled over the students as he made a beeline for the Staff Table. Spotting the mediwitch, Harry pulled up right in front of her, ignoring the spluttering of the various faculty.

"Madam Pomfrey," Harry said quietly yet urgently, "there are three emergencies upstairs that need you. Now."

The middle-aged woman had one thin hand raised to her throat as she stared at Harry without moving.

Curious, Harry looked down at himself as he realized that his shirt and most of his trousers were reduced to ribbons, he was covered in blood, and his armour was only good for making jerky for surly dogs. Between the shredded armour, the blood and the obvious wounds, it was hard to tell from more than a few feet away if Harry was seriously injured or just a bit knocked around.

Looking back at the matron, he pointed upstairs with one hand. "I'm not an emergency, if that helps." She looked ready to burst, but she quickly got to her feet and ran to the large fireplace behind the Staff table where she disappeared in a flash of Floo powder. Harry ignored the pointed looks from McGonagall, Snape, and Umbridge and flew back out of the Great Hall.

By the time Harry arrived back in the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey had her wand out and each person in a separate bed. Harry dropped to the floor by Remus' bed, letting the broom clatter to the ground, and took his old friend's wrist to check for the pulse. He was slightly amused to see the matron literally Stun Cyril to get him to lie still and shut up, before she swept a series of diagnostic spells over the man. She then scurried over to the Headmaster, repeating the diagnostic spells. As she performed each spell, her complexion slowly paled to resemble the pristine white robes she wore over her deep blue dress.

She cautiously reached out and opened the Headmaster's robes, causing the Bubble-Head charm holding the severed hand and partial forearm to bounce onto the floor before rolling to a stop under the bed. Harry thought that the woman looked absolutely petrified, but she shook herself after a moment and cast a few more spells before closing his robes.

Clucking frantically, she looked around before rushing over to Remus to repeat all the diagnostics a third time. Harry could tell she was unsettled by whatever she discovered, but before he could interrogate her, the doors swung open and Professor McGonagall swept into the room with an air of grace and command that would make Edgar envious.

Harry saw her eyes rapidly lock onto the prone form of the Headmaster, and she immediately glided to his side, taking note of the amputation and the Bubble-Head Charm holding the damage at bay. She then walked over to Cyril and looked at him closely before turning and making her way to Remus. Harry saw her eyebrows climb well into her hairline. She finally looked at Harry expectantly, the expression on her face telling Harry that if he failed to explain things immediately, he could expect another melee, this time with a very capable witch.

Harry gestured vaguely at the door. "I'm in no shape to do magic, so can you ensure us complete privacy?"

McGonagall's eyes never left Harry's as her wand flicked in the necessary arcs, casting Imperturbable Charms on every surface of the room.

Madam Pomfrey scurried to stand in front of him and made a shooing motion toward McGonagall. Turning to fully face Harry, she stared at him through narrowed eyes and pointed her wand at him. "Hold still, young man, or I'll Stun you as well," she commanded, already beginning her series of diagnostics. Harry decided it was wisest to just keep still. He doubted if he had enough strength to move, unless it was a life or death situation. "Right, you're not an emergency. If they weren't here, you would be, but you'll keep for a few hours yet before you're at risk of dying."

Harry sat back with Remus' wrist in his own hand, the slow throb in the Lycan's veins calming him in some obscure way. The matron was all business as she prepared several bowls of ingredients and extracted a few potions from a locked cabinet by the doors. Her casual dismissal of the severity of his wounds was funny in a manner he would never be able to define, but he was content to wait with Remus until she had things under control, or at least arranged to her satisfaction.

McGonagall kept regarding Harry with an expression that could have been carved from stone, but she relented when the mediwitch began working on the Headmaster. The graceful Transfiguration professor stood beside Pomfrey, calmly surveying every action taken on the man with whom she had worked for so many years.

When all of her potions, salves, and materials were prepped, Madam Pomfrey cancelled the charm on the remainder of the Headmaster's arm before rapidly casting new spells and dousing the protruding forearm with several potions. She was working quickly, but her immaculate robes looked like they would never be anything other than crimson hereafter. After nearly ten minutes of work on

Dumbledore, she paused and cast another set of diagnostics across the old man's body.

Slumping with a great sigh of relief, Madam Pomfrey turned to survey the others in the room. She rapidly Summoned several potions from her office and began administering them to both Cyril and Remus.

When Madam Pomfrey left the Headmaster's bedside, McGonagall apparently realized there was something under the bed and teased it out with her foot before she paled sufficiently to match the mediwitch. In one smooth motion, the Deputy Headmistress conjured a very comfortable chair and slumped into it, staring at the hand contained in the bubble of magic.

When Madam Pomfrey finally finished with Cyril and Remus, she poured out a final potion and handed it to Harry. "Drink this," she commanded abruptly, "and you'll be able to function for a while. You're about to collapse, even if you're too stubborn to realize it. You'll pay for taking this later, but I have to know what happened before I can proceed."

Harry looked at the goblet and then at Remus. "Err, Madam, is Remus... will he be okay?"

She merely raised her eyebrows at him in response. "Really, Mr. Potter, are you questioning my professional competence? I do know what I'm about, you know. Don't worry. He'll be fine by Monday afternoon. Now drink."

Harry looked into the goblet and back at the woman who was carefully watching him. Deciding there was no simple way to express the problem, he opted for the direct path. "Do you know what the date is, Madam, and what it means to Remus?"

The mediwitch just surveyed him coolly. "I had been working here for a few years when he arrived at Hogwarts as a first year, Mr. Potter. I will continue to heal him until tonight, when I shall once again escort him to the Shrieking Shack. Now please, drink that Energy Potion."



Harry quaffed the fuming goblet as quickly as his stomach would permit. As he began to feel some life creep back into his body and the aches and pains recede slightly, Harry placed the empty goblet down on the stand beside Remus' bed, still finding that odd comfort in the contact with his old friend. He saw that McGonagall had finally moved her gaze back onto him and once again was looking at him expectantly.

Breaking the Transfiguration professor's gaze, Harry looked at the matron. "We were looking into some things when the Headmaster found something unexpected." Harry released Remus with a faint feeling of regret before limping over to the Headmaster's bed. Harry picked up the bubble with the severed hand and placed it on the foot of the bed, again being careful to note the lack of reaction from the ring contained within. In Harry's vision, it was a disgusting morass of dark colours, but he knew that the two women could only see the flesh underneath.

"This new ring on his hand... it, err... seemed to possess him. He started attacking us at the same time as a band of Cynocephs came along." Harry slowly pushed the sphere around on the end of the bed, before picking it up and letting it settle on top of the small bedside table. "The ring and the Cynocephs were probably linked somehow. A bit of a debacle ensued, and here we are."

McGonagall looked ready to strangle Harry for his rather abbreviated version of what appeared to be momentous events and actually rose to stalk towards him, but Madam Pomfrey held her hand up and took control. "What happened with the arm?" Her voice could easily have impressed Filch as a cleaning agent.

Harry merely pointed to the hilt of his katana and shrugged. "I had to separate the ring from him, and it was this or kill him. All other options were gone at that point. The ring is very, very Dark, and I was afraid to let its influence continue." Pausing to meet the fiery eyes of the Deputy Headmistress, Harry told her the rest quietly. "If I hadn't, he would have killed all of us."

The matron waved Harry's explanation away as though it were an annoying insect. "His mind is locked up in some manner I do not understand. His body, however, is literally quite broken."

She looked directly at Harry. "He appears to have suffered a massive blow to the back and has several broken ribs, six cracked vertebrae, a compound broken hip, and a fractured pelvis. His knees are both showing ripped cartilage. He is covered in heavy bruising as though a tree fell on him. Your quick thinking with that charm saved him from bleeding to death from the amputation. That was very good. I'll have to write that up, but he's also suffering from more than one Stunning spell at close range and high power. And there is the distinct aura of very powerful Dark Magic over his entire body."

She paused to shake her head. "I can fix the body, Mr. Potter, but I cannot fix the mind. And I certainly cannot fix the mass of Dark Magic on him nor the fact that his own magic appears to have vanished."

McGonagall took two steps back, one hand covering her mouth, before she sat abruptly in the chair by Remus' bed. "Vanished?" she echoed quietly. The matron just nodded. "Permanently?"

Madam Pomfrey shook her head slowly. "Only time will tell."

Harry idly started playing with his wand. "No matter what spell I hit him with, it had no visible effect. I could only impede and injure him with physical objects." Harry slowly limped around the foot of all three beds. "It seemed like the ring just absorbed it all, leaving the Headmaster untouched. He was nearly impossible to fight, given how it started. Based on the damage, though, it sounds like the ring just kept him on his feet, that the effect from Banishing spells or the like went into the body rather than acting upon the body."

Madam Pomfrey held up her hands. "What actually happened to his body does not matter, Mr. Potter. I cannot treat him until I know how his magical core will respond. I need Professor Snape to come up here and help me care for him, but I am also under strict orders from the Headmaster not to allow Severus to access anything related to or containing Dark Magic."

Professor McGonagall stood up and faced the matron. "Given the situation, Poppy, I am now in charge, and I will bring Severus here. The Headmaster's concerns must take a back seat to the situation." As she turned to leave, however, Harry cleared his throat loudly.

"Um," he started with an apologetic look, "I'm sorry, but I can't let you do that. The reason Snape is under suspicion has to do with what happened today. If he were to know anything about it, I don't want to think about what would happen by tomorrow." At the woman's incredulous look, Harry held up one pleading hand. "It should be obvious I'm not telling you everything. With the little I have said, Snape could infer the rest, and you have no idea just how dangerous that is."

Looking back at the matron, Harry hoped he could work out an alternate solution quickly. "First, as I understand it, you want an expert in Dark Magic to help you assess and hopefully heal the Headmaster, right?" Madam Pomfrey nodded sharply.

Harry scratched at the back of his head for a moment before realising he was making the lump on his head hurt worse. "Right, I know a real expert, someone who will definitely know more than Snape ever could. Before I can go and get him, though, you need to wake Cyril up and let him run to the Aurors. We left a ... problem or two behind. And, well, I need his approval to fetch the person I'm thinking of."

After a quick exchange of glowers and stares between the two women that left Harry positive he would never understand a single female, the matron revived Cyril. Harry's Mentor sat up in a rush before grabbing his sides. "Oh, that's a bit uncomfortable." Cyril rubbed absently at his leg and skull while he looked around. "As I recall, Harry, I told you to leave me outside."

Harry shrugged.

Cyril frowned briefly. "We shall speak of this later, Harry. Poppy, will you release me, or must I fight my way out of here?"

Harry was surprised when the woman shook her finger in Cyril's face. "Cyril, you're in no condition to go anywhere. If I let you out of your

bed to speak to the Aurors through the Floo, will you spend the night quietly? Or do I need to Stun you again?"

Harry smirked before extracting Cyril's wand from the remnants of his clothes. Silently, Harry handed the wand to Madam Pomfrey, who promptly rewarded Harry with a tight smile.

"Very well, Poppy. If I may use your Floo and satisfactorily resolve our issues, I will remain. What of the others?"

McGonagall and Pomfrey both turned to look at Harry, causing him to sigh and close his eyes in concentration. The energy potion was helping, but he knew just how low his core was, and this was likely to make his headache flare to a magnitude that he would truly enjoy.

Remus will be here until Monday at least, Harry sent through Legilimency. She knows of his condition and has made arrangements. You are likely to be here just as long. She has said I am in no imminent danger of dying as long as I get some attention later. The Headmaster is... in great danger. We must discuss the ring later, but for now, they need an expert in Dark Magic. They want to bring Snape up here.

Cyril rubbed his temples with his fingertips, grunting slightly when Harry finished. Apparently the mental conversation was as painful for his Mentor as it was for Harry in their current respective conditions.

"You have a better suggestion?" Cyril asked after a moment. Harry ignored the startled look from the matron and Professor McGonagall.

Harry replied verbally to spare both of their skulls any more echoes. "Yes. I know someone. It requires violating the Wards of Exclusion."

"Not Edgar, then?" Cyril appeared to be faintly surprised.

Harry glanced briefly at the two women before turning back to Cyril. Edgar has the knowledge, but is less than a Squib. They need someone that can work real magic.

Cyril nodded slowly while gesturing for Harry to stop talking. "Your secrets are too loud, Harry. Bring whomever you must. I'll take the responsibility."

Madam Pomfrey clucked without apparent thought. "Mr. Potter," she said with some hint of exasperation, "if it will help the Headmaster, you may go, but bear in mind, you too need a lot of work. I would not like to think what will happen to you if you're not back within the hour."

Harry nodded and looked at McGonagall. The woman was regarding Harry with a strange expression, and after a moment, he broke the silence. "Will you let me out?" The tall woman blinked twice before turning away from Harry and facing the doors to the hospital wing. Before she could use her wand, however, Harry reminded her of the problem. "No one except those of us already here should come in, Professor. Especially not Snape or Umbridge."

With one cool glance, she flicked her wand twice, and the sounds of yelling in the hallway suddenly entered the room. "—summon the Aurors!" Harry immediately recognized the loathsome voice of Umbridge and surmised that the hallway must be quite the scene.

With a sigh, Harry picked up his broom and looked back at McGonagall while Umbridge started up again. "Open this door! I am the Senior Undersecretary—"

"Would you mind, Professor?" Harry asked, jerking his thumb toward the doors. The Deputy Headmistress' nostrils flared as her lips compressed, and she strode to the door before throwing it violently open.

"Silence!" She commanded in a voice that Harry was sure carried onto the Quidditch pitch. "I am in charge here, and I command you to leave the area, Dolores! You too, Severus! Return to your normal duties, and do not return here unless you personally require life-threatening emergency care!"

“Minerva, surely my potions are needed to—”

“The Minister must know what is going—”

Without bothering to repeat herself, the Deputy Headmistress immediately cast two spells that left the corridor perfectly silent, much to Harry’s private amusement. He was unable to see around her as she was keeping the door well blocked, but he was laughing to himself as she scolded the others. “Enough! While you are members of the staff at this school, you will follow my instructions! I have ordered you to leave! If you remain here one minute longer, you will cease to be employed here and will be seeking employment elsewhere! Is this absolutely clear?”

After a moment, Harry heard shuffling feet, and McGonagall spoke again. Her voice was still cool, but the faint air of hostility was no longer present. “And what are the rest of you here for?”

“Er, we, uh, wanted to see if, er, Harry was... er, okay?” Harry was surprised to hear Neville, of all people, talking to the professor.

“I see. And the rest of you?” After a few murmurs, the stern woman resumed speaking. “It’s generous of you all to stop by, but now is not the time. Please return to your common room or other activities. Mr. Potter will be staying here for the evening, but I do not believe he’s presently prepared to receive any visitors.”

After another moment, McGonagall returned to the room and held the doors shut. After taking a deep breath, she flashed a thin smile at Harry. “I trust that was sufficient, Mr. Potter?” Harry smiled back, feeling a good bit of admiration for the woman. “You will, of course, keep these events to yourself. I, in turn, shall see to it that we remain undisturbed. After Poppy helps Cyril place his calls, I shall seal the Floo as well.”

As Harry reached past her and opened the door, she leaned close to him and spoke quietly in his ear. “Be quick, please, Mr. Potter. We all need the Headmaster far more than you might appreciate. I would not enjoy feeding Hagrid’s pets with your remains should you take too

long.” With a quick grin, Harry winked at the woman before leaving. He paused long enough to hear McGonagall lock the door behind him before he hopped on his broom and took off down the hall.

Spotting a familiar head or three slowly bobbing down the stairs toward the entrance hall, Harry guided his broom to catch up to them rather than plummet in a dive straight down and then out the doors. “Neville!” he called softly as he pulled up behind the gentle soul and stepped off the broom.

Neville, Hermione, and Ginny all whipped around to stare at Harry. Ginny was clearly still suffering from the after-effects of her little exercise earlier, almost falling down as her knees buckled briefly. Harry waved his hand at them for silence before continuing. “Not now with the questions. I need paper and something to write with. Quickly, please.”

Harry ignored the close scrutiny of Ginny and Neville and focused on Hermione, who immediately put her bag on the floor and rummaged for a moment. Wordlessly she handed a quill and parchment over to Harry, her eyes going wide as she took in his appearance. Ignoring their looks, Harry turned Neville around and scribbled a hasty note across the parchment, using the stocky boy’s back as a convenient surface.

Padfoot –

I borrowed Moony for a bit of work with the Librarian. Things got a bit sticky, like when you got to stretch your legs again. Moony needs you tonight in Prongs’ old place by the Library. Tell Eagle we’re okay. The Librarian isn’t, but I’m trying to straighten that out before it becomes a lights-out proposition for both of us. Wait for me in the morning.

Howler

When Harry stopped writing, he saw Ginny blatantly looking at the note in his hand with her eyes narrowed and her hand unconsciously creeping toward her wand. Harry was confident she had read the entire note. Not feeling like dealing with the girl or her sudden recollections, Harry flashed Hermione a smile of thanks while tossing

her the quill back. Before any of them could react, Harry grabbed his broom and dropped over the edge of the staircase in a steep dive.

“Potter!” Harry chuckled to himself as Ginny yelled after him.

Stuffing the parchment through a hole that was far too easy to find in his dragon hide armour, he pulled open the entrance doors while continuing to ignore the redhead on the stairs calling after him.

As soon as he was outside the Hogwarts gates, he dropped off the broom and laid it across his shoulder. Taking a moment to catch his breath, he was unsurprised when he felt a few faint twitches and heat flashes in his legs. The day had already been quite long and tiring, and he had yet to have dinner. That his body was beginning to fail was inevitable. With a quiet command, Harry Portkeyed to the edge of his home near Brighton.

Looking around, Harry was happy it was dry and quiet behind the cottage. Closing his eyes, Harry let his mind relax for a moment before looking toward the window of his bedroom. “Hedwig,” he called in a whisper. Within moments, the snowy white owl was flying to him from a tree by the house. When she approached, he held out the broom handle for her to land on.

As Hedwig settled with a look of irritation on the handle, Harry gave her a lopsided smile. “Sorry, girl, but if you put your claws into me right now, I’m pretty sure I’d keel right over. Take this to Padfoot, will you?” With a gentle hoot and a faint rubbing of her head against his cheek, she accepted the somewhat crumpled parchment in her beak and flew back to the kitchen window. As she started tapping on the glass, Harry covered his watch again and commanded it to take him elsewhere.

By the time Harry and his guest had returned to the gates of Hogwarts, the rain was finally easing up and was now reduced to a soft drizzle. His companion towered over him, nearly seven feet tall, and wore a raven outfit of gloves, long sleeved shirt, trousers, and boots. The ankle-length trench coat was as black as everything else, including his aura, the hood shrouding the entire face in shadows. Harry was amused by what he was about to do, but the various



injuries he had received earlier were already starting to act up. He just wanted today to end.

Pushing the gates open, Harry reached one hand out and firmly placed it on his companion's neck, ensuring firm skin contact. It was a bit of a stretch given that Harry was a few inches shy of six feet, but it was manageable. Harry slowly reached into himself and drew out what little energy he had left in his core to alter the aura of his companion until it was no longer a flat black. The two slowly walked through the gates.

While his companion showed no reaction, Harry winced from the high pitched whine the wards were radiating. Apparently the protections were better than he had thought they were. Pushing a tad harder on what little was left of his magic, Harry managed to bring the noise level down to a soft buzzing until they fully crossed the threshold onto the grounds.

Releasing his companion with a sigh, Harry closed the gates before remounting his broom. He glided alongside his guest in order to keep up with each massive stride that brought them to the entrance of the castle in no time at all. "You're sure this is acceptable?" the voice was deep and quiet, without a trace of accent.

"Cyril said I could bring whomever I wanted." The drizzling rain was adding to Harry's already run-down state, leaving him with a keen awareness of how unpleasant English weather could be if you were in less than good health.

The behemoth let out a rumble deep in his chest which sounded suspiciously like a chuckle. He pushed open the entrance doors and moved unerringly toward the staircase that would take them to the hospital wing. The staircase was in mid-move away from the necessary connection they needed, but as soon as the man's foot touched the bottom step it immediately swung back to where it came from.

It was amusing to Harry just how quickly they arrived outside the infirmary doors. Knocking sharply, Harry called out softly, "I'm baaaack."

The door opened swiftly, revealing a frowning Professor McGonagall. When she stepped back, Harry and his guest entered quietly. The Deputy Headmistress promptly cast Imperturbable Charms about the room again.

Harry noticed Remus' bed was empty, and when he looked at Madam Pomfrey questioningly, she told him his old friend was resting in a safe place. Knowing what she was really saying, Harry slumped down into a seat, looking back at the two women and Cyril. "This is an associate of mine, a student of the Da'ath, who chooses to go by the present name of Crowley."

"Really," Crowley corrected quietly, "a student of the Da'ath Smowl."

The three elders in the room froze. Cyril looked sharply to Harry before turning back to Crowley. "Smowl, you said?"

Crowley slowly pulled his hood off his head, revealing the face of an aged goblin. A freakishly tall, yet still quite old, goblin. "Indeed." As the goblin moved to the foot of the Headmaster's bed, he reached out one cautious hand to touch the amputated arm just above the bandages.

Before anyone could blink, a bright flash of flames erupted in the centre of the room, and Fawkes screamed a cry of defiance. He headed directly for Crowley, who reflexively ducked and dived under the bed. Harry jumped up and yelled to get the phoenix's attention. "Fawkes! No! He's here to help!"

Ignoring Harry, the phoenix flew lower to attack Crowley, flames bursting across its body as it screamed its hatred of the goblin. Harry limped as quickly as his body would allow him, trying to get near the Headmaster's bed, while Crowley was rapidly sliding on the floor to get away from the enraged bird.

Crowley cleared the underside of the bed, then jumped behind Harry and held on as though he was a human shield. Harry stopped moving and let out a faint gasp of pain as Crowley's iron grip exacerbated his shoulder injuries.

“Fawkes!” Harry shouted as the phoenix came up and prepared to attack again. “Let me explain! Dumbledore is hurt! He’s under the control of Dark Magic!” Both Harry and Crowley had to duck and twist to avoid the flaming form of the Headmaster’s familiar. “Crowley is here to break the curse! He’s helped me before! It will be all right!”

Fawkes stopped attacking them but continued to fly about the ceiling in agitation with a warbling cry that made Harry shiver. Crowley held up both hands and slowly backed away from the Headmaster’s bed. When Crowley was against the wall by the doors, Fawkes stopped flaming and screaming and flew down to land by Dumbledore’s head, hunching protectively over his master.

“Fawkes, Crowley will stay over there, all right? Just listen for a moment, will you?” The phoenix kept one eye on Crowley and one eye on Harry, feathers ruffled and talons clenching and unclenching the railing. “Riddle left a trap. It got Dumbledore. He’s going to die if we don’t break the curse. We can’t trust Snape right now, so I had to get someone who would know how to help. Crowley is Da’ath Smowl, but he’s not going to hurt anyone!”

The highly intelligent magical sentient creature was clearly not convinced. Harry pointed to the bedside table, where the bubble of magic containing the amputated hand rested. “The trap ring is there, Fawkes. Just look at it.” The phoenix shifted its body to glance at the bubble but kept one eye fixed determinedly on Crowley.

After a long moment, the phoenix let out a mournful cry and sang a short song of sorrow. Dumbledore showed no reaction, but it made Harry feel as though this was the last night that the world would ever have. Cyril, McGonagall, and Madam Pomfrey all appeared to be quite shaken both by the sudden attack and by the song. Crowley had tears running down his face as he gazed at the phoenix.

Harry slowly walked over to the suddenly silent creature. “We’ll go slow, Fawkes, and tell you everything before we do anything. Will you let us help?” Fawkes swivelled both eyes on Harry. Without thinking

about it, Harry leaned out and stroked Fawkes the way Hedwig liked attention, being careful to scratch in all the right places.

Taking the calming of the bird as tacit permission, Madam Pomfrey walked over and led Crowley back to the Headmaster's side. Fawkes shifted a bit and ruffled his feathers but did not attack or cry out. Crowley spent some time running his hands in the air just above the Headmaster, gradually covering every part of his body.

Turning, he approached the encased hand and ring quietly. After looking at it from several angles, he slowly shook his head. "This is unfortunate, Harry. I see the 'owth Qayin. It was not done well, and the control is severed. This traps the mind of Albus Dumbledore."

Madam Pomfrey summoned several old texts from her office, placing them on a rapidly conjured table, while asking hesitantly of Crowley, "Qayin? Is there a cure? I haven't heard of it." She began muttering to herself, half-ignoring the goblin beside her, as she paged through her tomes of magical remedies and fired off questions faster than he could ever answer.

Finally the goblin placed one massive hand across the tome she was consulting.

"There is not a cure, Madam, but there is a way to release his mind, and he should recover. I will prepare it. Perhaps you should treat young Harry for his wounds in the meantime? I will explain what I am doing as I go." Crowley looked hesitantly at the phoenix. "I shall do nothing without your permission, Flereous Yamin." Fawkes responded by fluffing his feathers and crest but otherwise remained silent.

As Madam Pomfrey pushed Harry into the bed that Remus had occupied, she kept up a stream of anxious muttering as she dosed him with potions and spells to begin repairing his injuries. The longer she worked, the more Harry realized he had been in quite a bit of pain. Crowley kept his concentration strictly on the two potions he was preparing. One would be used to bathe the wound and would be spread over the body to remove any residue of the curse. The other potion, which needed to be consumed, would restore the mind's

control. If the Headmaster's will was strong enough, he would awaken after the ring was destroyed.

Harry struggled to remain conscious but found himself drifting off as the myriad potions Madam Pomfrey was pouring into him began to work their magic. In his dreams, which were occasionally interrupted by flashes of pain, he relived the attack outside the Headmaster's office, the fight at the Gaunt cottage, and the graveyard in Little Hangleton. He could see the gravestones with the large manor house just up the hill. The Muggle village was nestled in the valley below. For some reason, the entire scene was tickling the back of his brain during his dream, but he was unable to understand what it was saying.

The bright flash of light and cry from Fawkes woke Harry. The Headmaster had a faint bit of colour back but was swathed in sufficient bandages to make a Royal Egyptian mummy jealous. Crowley and Cyril were kneeling in the centre of the floor around what was left of Dumbledore's hand. The amputated hand and arm had become a black, withered lump of desiccated flesh. The ring fell off the finger when Crowley gently picked up the hand, and the glittering stone inset to the ring shattered as it made contact with the floor of the hospital wing.

"You destroyed the Horcrux, then?" Harry asked quietly.

Professor McGonagall looked up from her horrified contemplation of the ring. "Horcrux?" she asked sharply.

Cursing his stupidity, Harry turned to look at Cyril. His Mentor was scrutinizing the professor speculatively, and he had brought out his wand. Madam Pomfrey came bustling out of her office. "What's all this noise? Mr. Potter and the Headmaster need their rest! Cyril, you should be resting as well!"

Cyril absently waved the woman off. "Yes, yes, Poppy, in a moment. Minerva, I will require an Unbreakable Vow from you to assure me that you will keep this secret, or else I shall have no choice but to Oblivate you."

The matron stopped and watched as McGonagall slowly made the vow to keep the secrets she had learned today, to discuss them only with the people already privy to them, unless released to speak of events by either Cyril or Albus.

After accepting the vow, Cyril flicked his wand several times and cleaned up the mess from the floor. Scooping up the remainder of the ring, he slid it into a pocket. Crowley placed the desiccated hand and forearm into a bowl before filling the bowl with acid and watching everything dissolve. Madam Pomfrey offered Crowley a bed for the night, but he politely declined and said he must return to his family.

“Very well,” Cyril cut into the brewing argument over whether the goblin should stay or not. “Harry, please return Crowley to his home. You and I still need to talk, so I shall wait for your return.”

Grunting a bit, Harry got up and grabbed his broom, which was leaning against the small table by his bed. Harry could feel the room spinning ever so slightly, a sure sign the powerful pain potions were making him light-headed. Crowley briefly nodded to Cyril, McGonagall, and Madam Pomfrey. Silently, the large goblin turned and walked through the doors, as Harry followed back into the dark corridors of the castle. Crowley covered himself again with his hood as he walked along.

“You did not tell me there was a phoenix here,” he offered quietly.

Harry shot a wry smile at Crowley, but the goblin did not return it. “It wasn’t at the top of my list of things to remember.” Pausing for a long moment, Harry considered how much worse the situation could have been. “I’m sorry for that. Really, though, most people know Dumbledore has a phoenix familiar. I suppose I’m not used to thinking of it as noteworthy.”

Crowley remained silent as they left the castle and moved back toward the gates. Harry again carefully manipulated the aura around Crowley before they stepped through the wards. Harry was fairly certain that no one else knew how to bypass Wards of Exclusion.

Harry had stumbled across the secret by accident and had not yet shared the method with Remus. It was one of the few levers he had left in his arsenal to browbeat Remus into telling him something his old friend would rather not. Over the years, Harry and Remus had ferreted out most of each other's secrets, but it was good to always have an ace up the sleeve for the unexpected situation or two.

Crowley stood outside the gates and stared at the castle. "It was good to see it again, Harry. I thank you for the opportunity."

Harry smiled faintly. "I thank you for helping us."

With a brief wave, Crowley silently disappeared.

As Harry flew back inside Hogwarts, he caught the familiar sight of red hair slinking inside the shadowy Great Hall. Dropping off his broom and standing in the hollow behind one of the doors to the hall, he watched quietly as Ginny, Fred, and George slowly moved around the room, casting various spells as they did so.

When they appeared to be finished, Fred and George disappeared into the antechamber behind the Staff Table whereas Ginny headed for the main doors. As soon as she was abreast of Harry, he coughed slightly. Her wand was aimed at his face before he realised she had moved at all. Combined with the effects of the potions, it left him feeling slightly breathless.

Smirking slightly, he looked at her carefully. "Are you aware that you always put your hair in a plait before planning or working mischief?"

Ginny's expression was completely baffled. "What?"

Harry shrugged before standing up. "Breakfast will be interesting, I gather." He paused to survey the room, noting the faint lights radiating from dormant spells.

When Harry turned back to her, he found Ginny staring at him interestedly. Harry looked down and noticed that he was in hospital pyjamas. Apparently Madam Pomfrey had changed his clothes when

he had dozed off from the matron's excellent potions. "It's a new fashion trend," he joked.

"I hope it's not catching," she retorted, looking into his eyes. "You have something of mine," Ginny said quietly. "Where's my map?"

Harry leaned over to whisper conspiratorially, "It's not your map."

"Fred and George found it and later gave it to me. It's mine," she insisted.

"Oh?" Harry looked her slowly up and down. "Prove it. Tell me who the creators really were."

Ginny flushed darkly and trained her wand on him again. "I can just Stun you and take it back."

Harry laughed at her audacity. "You do that. It's in my trunk. In my room. You know where my room is? It's behind the..." Harry's eyes went wide. "Bugger! That old coot is just too sly! Ha!"

Laughing at the situation, Harry looked back at a confused Ginny. "It's in my trunk. If you can get it, you can have it back." Winking at her, Harry casually grabbed his broom. "But if you can't get it, and you're really nice to me, I might get the makers to make another one." Before she could react, Harry took off for the hospital wing, enjoying the slightly relaxing and tipsy feeling of whatever pain potions Madam Pomfrey had him on.

The lights were quite low in the hospital wing when he arrived. The Headmaster still slumbered on, with no apparent change in his condition. Fawkes was sleeping with his head tucked under a wing, nestled on the pillow the old man was using. Cyril watched Harry as he came to stand at the foot of his Mentor's bed.

"What did the Aurors do, sir?" Harry finally asked into the silence as he sat in the chair beside Cyril.



Cyril looked contemplative for a long moment. "They were puzzled as they could find no bodies. It was strange that while they found clear evidence of our battle and of the Cynocephs' presence... there were no bodies. And I know we killed many of them. They are supposed to be looking into the situation."

Cyril laid back and stretched languorously. "That was quick thinking, lad. While I hope you don't have to do something like that again, your instincts were right this time." Harry watched as Cyril shook his head. "Albus will thank you later, but this is going to be hard for him to overcome."

Harry rose at Cyril's vague gesture to do so. "Off to bed with you, Harry. It seems that tomorrow will be another long day, and we still have to go to Geneva. That is, if we can escape young Poppy's ministrations. I must think on our situation and today's events before we talk more."

After they bid each other a quiet good night, Harry found himself walking laboriously to his bed. His aches and pains would probably keep him stiff for a few days, but Harry had definitely been through worse.

Apparently Cyril had not been completely idle while Harry was out and about. That mirror that was slowly driving him round the bend was standing tall beside the infirmery bed, waiting for Harry's nightly exercise in reflection. Deciding to get it over with before crawling into his bed for the night, Harry slinked over to slouch in front of the mirror and tried vainly to study his reflection properly.

It was a struggle at first. All he could see was the abundant damage he had accrued during the day peeking out around the scratchy pyjamas. He would definitely need to order some replacement body armour, and he would be wearing his backup set in the interim. Harry would also be discarding the remains of the clothing he had set out in today.

Finally looking away from the signs of damage still remaining, Harry struggled to meet his own gaze.

No matter how he concentrated, his eyes kept drifting back to his hands.

Tonight was clearly a bad time for reflections.

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A/N:

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to Chreechree and cwarbeck. Thanks to Reg and other folks for lending their Brit-picking data, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

## Chapter 17 : Inflection Points, Part 1 of 4

The introduction of magic to the life cycle of creatures upon the planet has had various effects upon those creatures. While the presently loose classification system in widespread use is commonly categorized at four levels – non-magical humans, magical humans, non-magical animal or plant, and magical animal or plant – in reality every living thing is magical at some level. The artificial and flawed distinction in vernacular use is centred entirely around those that are capable of using their inherent magic, such as Wizards or Witches or so-called powerful magical creatures, and those that are not so capable.

Each living thing, be it plant or animal or other, contains a magical core. This core is analogous to what the Muggles refer to as a battery, in that it stores a certain amount of magical energy. To properly categorize the magical capability of any living thing requires an understanding of the approximate scaling of the core size across species, and the resultant natural breakpoints to amalgamate zones of high conformance.

Without regard to fundamental unit volume, the approximate size of a “Muggle” or other non-magic-using entity’s core is one unit. Minor magic-using creatures, such as so-called Squibs, garden gnomes, flobberworms, Kneazles, or post owls have a core volume of approximately ten units. Moderate magical creatures, such as Acromantulas and nymphs, have a core size of around seventy-five units. Complex magical creatures, including wizards, witches, centaurs, unicorns, or hippogriffs have a core size of two hundred units. The last major distinction is for major magical creatures, such as a dragon or phoenix, which have a core size of nearly five hundred units.

While there is natural genetic and species variation, after exhaustive study of many specimens, no variation has yet been observed beyond a five percent margin over the indicated approximate core size. The surprising implication of this is that the widely held belief that some wizards or witches are “more powerful” than others is patently untrue. Much like the brain, which is roughly equal in volume and composition among members of a species, the variation in ability

is controlled by other factors than such a rather mundane concept as raw core size.

The empirical evidence also paints a very surprising result in that it shows magical core size is set by the time of birth, hatching, or sprouting. Moreover, magical core size is completely unalterable. Infantile life forms come into existence with fully formed magical cores, while the resultant support infrastructure must grow with the development of the life form. There are few recorded cases of attempts to alter core size through rituals or potions, but the end result has always been terminal. Each and every person attempting such a change experienced nearly instantaneous death by unquenchable fire, enveloping the host from the inside out.

Close examination has further revealed that the magical core acts like a battery in more ways than the storage analogy suggests. The issues of recharge and discharge also bear a striking resemblance to the Muggle concepts around electricity and magnets, in that both recharge and discharge require interaction with other parts of the magical infrastructure in living entities. The essence of magical energy itself is composed of six different ...

... Excerpt from Theory of Magic, Volume I, Section 1, edited by R.J.L.

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Sun, 10 Sep 1995

The incessant scrrrtch, scrrrtch was the sound that finally permeated Harry's consciousness while he was still in the warm haze of sleep. No matter how he rearranged the blankets or shifted his position, it was a noise that refused to fade into the background, causing him to finally sit up and blearily look around the room.

Latent stiffness in his muscles and a lingering echo of pain in his very bones caused him to groan involuntarily. The stark reminders of being in the hospital wing rushed into his brain, from the unpleasantly coarse pyjamas he was wearing to the tediously uniform white colours everywhere, and finally to the militant precision with which

everything was organized, all the way down to the thin sheets on every bed.

With his groan, however, the noise ceased, causing Harry to realise it was coming from the bed to his left. Remus was sitting up, surrounded by parchment, one quill in hand and an improvised lap desk across his knees. The werewolf was watching Harry carefully, while Harry was in turn trying to rouse his brain enough to fully note Remus' condition.

Despite the dark circles under his old friend's eyes and the appearance of a few bandages on his arms, he seemed no worse for the wear. Remus' eyes, however, were still tracking Harry's movements.

"Alright there, Harry?" he asked carefully.

Harry opened his mouth for a quick retort but found that the overwhelming bad taste in the back of his throat made him choke on his own breath. "Ungh!" was all he could mutter. Remus smiled at him briefly before he pushed a cart with a pitcher of water and a goblet toward Harry's bedside.

After several swishing motions and a rapid draining of the cup's contents, Harry shook his head briefly before realising that there was a low-level headache lurking at the base of his skull. It also seemed that the headache had no intention of remaining a low-level threat for long. "Yeah," he finally offered while carefully holding his head, "just great. Is there some rule that medical types have to dress you in really itchy clothes?"

Remus just chuckled in response.

"Your writing was kind of loud. I thought you hated that whole antiquated parchment and quill bit, old man."

"Still pushing the same tired joke, Harry?" Remus absently twirled the quill with incredible deftness as he wove it in and out of all his

fingers. "When in Rome, Harry, when in Rome... I should call Poppy, I suspect you need another dose of potions and a checkup."

Harry winced slightly at the thought of the matron coming out and giving him more potions. "She's a sneaky one, Remus. Made me loopy with some pain potions and such last night, probably to get me to sleep. And the aftertaste... bleh!"

"It's for your own good, Harry," Remus replied quietly.

"Eat your lima beans, Harry, they're for your own good!" Harry mocked his friend. After a moment of rubbing at various spots on his head that were bothering him, Harry looked back over to Remus. "What are you working on anyway?"

Remus shrugged. "I thought I'd try again to work on the magical core explanation. I can't say it's any more readable now than it was before. I keep trying to come up with an analogy for the core and magic energy that doesn't hinge on understanding either Muggles or the Magical Community, but so far no luck."

Harry snorted. "You're not still comparing it to an airplane, are you?"

Remus laughed outright. "No, I gave up on that. Now I'm trying batteries and electricity. The problem is, Muggles only understand one type of electricity."

Harry rolled onto his side and stared balefully at Remus. "For a well-educated man, Remus, you're amazingly dense. No pure-blood will read that duff, and if you keep going with the analogy, you'll just confuse those who were raised by Muggles when they try to unravel it all."

Remus smiled back. "You're no slouch upstairs either, Harry, and your best suggestion was to compare it to flavours of sweets."

Harry smiled a bit before his headache insisted that he move as little as possible and talk a bit quieter. "Yeah, well, it works for me."

Shaking his head, Remus gathered up the parchments, stacking them neatly, before clambering over to Harry and dropping into the chair by the bedside. "So did we win yesterday? I'm not quite sure what happened, and no one else has any answers for me right now."

Harry glanced around, noting that Cyril was still out cold and that the Headmaster's bed was enclosed by curtains. Looking back at Remus, Harry decided that there would be no useful conversation without some intervention. "Alright Remus," he offered, "go and get the mediwitch, and if she can stop this headache, we'll get into it, right?"

Remus flashed a grin at Harry and shuffled off to the office in the back. Within seconds, the plain-spoken but generous woman was striding back toward Harry while Remus followed slowly along in her wake.

"Mr Potter, awake at last, I see," she said absently, as she promptly waved her wand about his body in various patterns. "Bit of a headache there, and it looks like some rather impressive bone bruises are forming." She started clucking absently under her breath as she continued to consider him. "The burns seem to be almost gone. That leg is healing a little slower than I expected... looked more like an animal bite than anything, but it's not responding as I'd expect..."

Harry winced slightly when she reached out one hand to vigorously poke and prod where the Transfigured wolf had left him a loving bite to reflect on. After an interminable amount of poking and prodding, Madam Pomfrey gathered up a collection of potions and deposited them in front of Harry.

"Very well, Mr Potter. You still won't tell me more about the events of yesterday? It might help in your treatment."

Harry just offered a wan smile in silence.

Sighing, she pointed at the collection of vials. "Take those. I'll order some breakfast for you and Remus. If you behave, Mr Potter, I'll let you wander about the wing and maybe sit with Remus for a while."

Remus was doing his best to hide his grin behind a hand, but the mediwitch rounded on him quickly. "And you, Remus Lupin, ought to still be in your bed! I said you could do some quiet writing, not quiet roaming!" Grabbing one arm, she manhandled the werewolf back to his bed and forced him to climb under the thin blankets. "Now you stay there this time! You're still recovering from those clandestine events, and the full moon isn't helping you at all."

Shaking her head, apparently at the stupidity of them all, she bustled off to check on Cyril and then the Headmaster, disappearing briefly behind the curtains. She was back out and walking toward the office almost before the fabric stopped billowing from her entrance. As she passed Harry's bed, however, she stopped and glared at Harry before pointing again at the potions.

Sighing, Harry did his best to consume the foul concoctions as quickly as possible to minimize the amount of time he had to taste them. When he had swallowed the last drop, she nodded once in satisfaction before flicking her wand and continuing back to her office, the various vials and goblets following along in a dance of silent merriment through the air.

Remus was snickering softly, which only caused Harry to frown at his friend. While he could feel the potions slowly working at relieving the various aches and pains, and most importantly his now-blossoming headache, the matron walked back out of her office with a bundle of wooden bricks that resembled over-sized children's building blocks. Watching with increasing curiosity, Harry saw her place them in a neat line, with ample space between blocks, all around the three beds on the left wall closest to her office. Standing back, she muttered a few incantations while tracing delicate arcs in the air. When she finished her wand work, the blocks shimmered briefly before becoming a solid stone wall with a soft pop!

Exchanging a startled glance with an equally surprised Remus, Harry watched as she tapped the centre of the wall facing the aisle. Immediately, a large door appeared, gently swinging inward. Nodding to herself, the mediwitch did some rapid spellwork to float the three beds out of the private room, moving them to the front of the Infirmary.



Striding back toward the Headmaster's area, she gathered the privacy curtains and everything inside them, gently steering it all into the vacant space and tutting absently when Fawkes started trilling inquisitively.

When the mediwitch disappeared into the room with the Headmaster, Harry shot a tight grin at Remus. "We need to learn more about those block things, Remus."

Remus gave Harry a long look. "What are you thinking of now, Harry?"

Harry shook his head silently. "Trust me. You don't want to know. Can you pump her for details? Which spells and where to get the blocks?"

Sighing, his old friend gave a long suffering look at the ceiling. "Ignoring your abysmal word choice, Harry, I'll see what I can find out."

"What?" Harry adopted a face of pure innocence, his eyes wide open as he restarted an old discussion. "You can call it a discussion or socialisation or whatever, but it's still just milking her for her knowledge. Whatever were you thinking of?"

Remus shook his head, glancing back at Madam Pomfrey as she exited the private room, sealing the door shut before returning to her office. As soon as she was out of sight, Harry scrambled in his pockets to pull out his wand. Pointing it at Remus' bed, Harry thought a firm Accio! and was rewarded by his old friend arriving in a more convenient range for private conversation.

Turning around, Harry quickly cast a Perimeter Alert Charm set to activate on the foot of his bed. Looking back to Remus, Harry sighed and lay down in the bed, mildly regretful that it was so firm and hard to get comfortable in. He squirmed around a moment, then, to Remus' consternation, Harry finally climbed out of the bed and cast a fast Cushioning Charm on the surface. He then converted the blankets into soft green fuzzy ones and his scratchy pyjamas to black fleece. With those changes in place, Harry happily settled into his bed.

When Remus' eyes lit up in sudden hope, Harry dug around on the stand by his bed before turning up Remus' wand and throwing it to the werewolf. In a matter of moments, both were slouched down and quite comfortable, although their blankets were suspiciously thick-looking under the very thin covers.

Remus cleared his throat briefly before expanding on his original question. "So, aside from the playful Cynocephs dropping by for a visit, what started it all? And how did we end up here? Did we win, lose, or draw?"

Harry sighed as he slunk down a little lower. "I wish I knew, Remus, I wish I knew." Pulling his sensory monitor off from around his neck, he placed it on the edge of the bed. "Be glad that Dumbledore showed me the trick of making these things play back at different rates, or else we'd be sitting here a long time, old man." Harry glared at his friend when the werewolf snorted disbelievingly. "Imagine that someone who could invent something kept failing to educate the ignorant purchasers on fully using it. Crazy talk, eh?"

Remus rolled his eyes and grabbed the monitor from Harry. "Only amateurs adjust playback rates, Harry. Professionals know how to jump around." With a quick wink, Remus applied his wand and caused the monitor to project four different moments simultaneously, each spaced apart by hours. Through a rapid series of selections with the wand in the displays, Remus quickly settled into the scene right before Dumbledore reached for the concealed brick in the fireplace.

"And you still haven't shown me how to do any of that," Harry reminded him pointedly.

"You still owe me on how to bypass Exclusions," Remus countered absently.

"Yeah, but you still owe me on how to switch a Portkey destination," Harry shot back.

"You still haven't told me how you did that trick with Hedwig."

“You haven’t taught me how to build nested wards.”

“You keep hiding how you designed those hexes that get through shields.”

“You keep avoiding me when I ask you how to make a Pensieve.”

“I gave you the book for that when you came to Hogwarts.”

When Remus finally glanced back at him, Harry could tell he looked like a fool with one finger in the air and his mouth open like a goldfish. Resigned to losing this exchange, Harry nodded in defeat. “Right, well, that’s the start of it, then, Remus.”

Grinning triumphantly, Remus went back to the sensory monitor. Before Remus could start the playback, however, the doors to the Infirmary burst open, and Fred and George Weasley strode in, carrying Ginny between them. Her face was scrunched up in an expression of high discomfort, and the twins looked rather agitated as well. “Madam Pomfrey!” Fred called urgently.

Before the Weasleys could realise that anyone else was in the room, Harry quickly Summoned the sensory monitor, stuffed it into the pouch around his neck, and hastily disarmed the Proximity Charm that was making his bed vibrate and hum. As the matron came bustling out, Harry surreptitiously Banished Remus’ bed back to where it was supposed to be. The motion of the bed was enough to cause the Weasleys to become conscious that others were present, whereas Madam Pomfrey took no notice and broke into a run to see what was wrong with Ginny.

Harry watched as she floated Ginny, ignoring the young woman’s groans and protests, into a bed and started running diagnostics over her. Without breaking her concentration, she called out to the twins in a voice that brooked no mischief and demanded to know what exactly happened.

“Dunno,” Fred said anxiously. “She was supposed to meet us in the common room, but we got worried when she was late. She’s never late when she says she’ll meet us, uh, for, err...”

George piped up, apparently to cover his brother’s momentary lack of mental adroitness. “For our tutoring lessons, Madam Pomfrey. We were about to try the stairs to get her when she came staggering down and groaning about how much pain she was in, so we decided to bring her here.”

Fred nodded with his twin. Harry, meanwhile, started laughing at them. “Let me guess,” he called out loudly, “you can’t find anything wrong but a few traces of a prior lactic acid build-up, some over-worked muscles, and a high enzyme level?”

All the conscious people in the room turned to stare at Harry. Madam Pomfrey looked surprised that he knew what she had found. “That’s exactly correct, Mr Potter. How do you know this?”

Harry shrugged absently. “I’ve taken over Ginny’s physical conditioning. Yesterday, I pushed her to see how willing she was to get in shape. It’s the natural side effect of her body telling her to take it easy for a few days, considering what I did to her.”

Madam Pomfrey seemed unimpressed with the answer. “Well, I’ve got a potion that will fix her right up.”

Before she could turn to fetch it, however, Harry stopped her quickly. “Wait a moment, please. You need to ask Ginny if she wants to take it.” Ignoring the redhead’s exaggerated but slow nodding, Harry kept his eyes on Madam Pomfrey as he explained. “It’s up to you, of course, to provide it. But if Ginny takes it, I won’t be training her any more, and she needs to know that’s part of the choice.”

“What?!” Fred exploded. “You want her to be in pain like that?”

Ginny was giving Harry a look that he was sure could peel Grindylows off a baby, but he continued to ignore her as he looked at

the outraged faces of Fred and George. "If she takes the potion, do you know what it will really do?"

Both the boys stopped to look at each other in puzzlement at the very odd question before giving a quick shake of their heads. Looking back at Madam Pomfrey, he asked her point blank, "And you, Madam Pomfrey?"

Pomfrey nodded her head slowly, clearly understanding the point Harry was making. "It will restore her muscles to their undamaged state."

"Exactly. And that state is unconditioned. If she takes the potion, it will be like she never did the exercise yesterday." Smiling sadly back at Ginny, he finally met her death glares. "It's up to you, of course. You may take the potion and feel better now, but you'll have to find your own way to train. I'm not helping someone who won't do the work. If you work through the pain, which is telling you to go easy for a day or three, eventually you won't need potions."

Ginny hissed at Harry vehemently as she narrowed her eyes. "You did this to me knowing how I would feel this morning? And you didn't warn me?"

Harry smiled blandly at the witch.

In the blink of an eye, her wand was trained on Harry and sparks were coming off the tip. "You put me in this condition!"

"Oi!" George said, while shoving his brother out of the line of fire. "You may have six brothers, but we're not exactly quick to replace!"

Everyone else seemed to be focused on the two fifteen year olds. Harry shrugged and kept his smile on his face. "So you're jogging around the lake again today, then, Ginny? Or are you going to take that potion?"

The sparks shooting off her wand started veering in random directions around her shaking fist, as Ginny started muttering oaths so vile that Fred leaned over and clapped a hand on her mouth.

“Right!” he said while looking at Madam Pomfrey’s scowl. “We’ll just be, uh, going then!”

As the twins grabbed the swearing and glaring redhead to carry her back out of the room, Harry watched her face go pale before she looked at him with horror. “Jog around the lake...?” was all he heard as they hurried her out of the room.

Chuckling, Remus stared out the window while shaking his head. “That is not a witch to turn your back on,” he observed to no one in particular.

Harry flashed Remus a tight smile while Madam Pomfrey went back to her office, muttering about the foibles of teenagers and their strange notions of a good time. Remus glanced at the large clock on the wall by the mediwitch’s office door and pointed it out to Harry. “Sirius thinks you’re going to meet him this morning.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed while fishing out his sensory monitor again. He tossed it over to Remus. “I sent him a note last night to come help you and wait for me today. I wanted to explain it to him quickly rather than get the sad puppy eyes and guilt trip later.”

Smiling at the image, Remus took the silvery orb without saying anything for a long moment. “Thanks, Harry.”

Harry shrugged. “I would’ve been there for you, but I ran into a spot of trouble on the way home from work yesterday...”

Both Harry and Remus shared a smirk. “He said he’d wait on the far side of the lake. When are you going to go see him?”

Harry sighed. “I doubt Madam Pomfrey’s going to let me just walk out of here,” he replied while jerking his head toward the office in the back. “I need a diversion of some kind so I can sneak off. Maybe I’ll

turn one of the beds into a flock of pixies or something.” Pausing in thought, he glanced uneasily at the doors of the hospital wing. “Speaking of which, those three Weasleys were up to something last night.”

Remus was again flicking through sections of the sensory monitor to isolate the beginning of the previous day’s events. “Oh?” he asked in a distracted voice.

“Some prank or something in the Great Hall for this morning.” Harry shrugged. “I should have asked one of them about it, I suppose, but I wasn’t tracking too well by that point. It’s all kind of fuzzy after that woman foisted her potions off on me last night.”

Remus just grunted slightly as the image of Dumbledore reaching for the fireplace appeared again. Before he released the playback, Harry cast another Proximity Charm around their beds and leaned back. “Let me know when you’ve seen it all.”

Remus was already ignoring Harry, intently watching the scene unfold in the sensory monitor’s projection field. Harry enjoyed the pretty patterns of magic flowing from Remus’ wand into the monitor and up into the volume of air where the projection was displayed. It was hauntingly similar to the rippling waves in a small creek as the water ran over submerged rocks.

“That doesn’t seem right,” Remus murmured while watching the duel inside the cottage. “Harry, I’m going to have to watch this a dozen times to figure out the sequencing.” The playback showed them already outside with Harry preparing for the second round. “There’s no way Dumbledore should be standing.”

Remus continued muttering as the fight playback continued, but Harry ignored it as he dug around and pulled his broom up onto the bed. After a careful examination, he was satisfied that there was no damage to his Firebolt and put it to one side. Rummaging through the rest of his stuff, he confirmed that his armour was sadly unsalvageable. The remnants of his clothes would only serve for cleaning the loo at best. Resigned to being stuck in his somewhat

more comfortable hospital pyjamas, Harry looked back at his friend to find that the playback was over and that Remus was staring at the ceiling.

“Remus?” he asked quietly.

“You shouldn’t have survived that, Harry,” his old friend replied, as he gazed at the boring yet uniform white surface. “Dumbledore had the drop on you, and he landed the first round. You know that almost always decides things right then and there.”

Harry grunted noncommittally and played with the handle of the Firebolt. “If the cottage hadn’t started coming down, Remus, I wouldn’t have survived. I needed that breather to get my balance back.”

The werewolf turned to look at Harry with a puzzled expression. “You’ve been holding back on us, haven’t you, Harry?”

Harry sighed and leaned back to mimic his friend’s habit of staring at the ceiling when debating issues. “Not really, Remus. If I get hacked off enough, I’ve found I can do a couple of things that I can’t seem to figure out how to do otherwise.”

“Hmmm...” Remus was quiet for a while. “You know, in the long run, Dumbledore will thank you for what you did, Harry. But up front, it’s going to be very hard for him to come to terms with it.”

“Maybe,” Harry offered cautiously. “I’m not sure I had another option. I couldn’t think of one. You missed the big news. You should watch the diagnosis when we got back here. Pomfrey said Dumbledore’s magic is gone.”

“What?!” Remus sat up and stared at Harry. “That’s not possible!”

Harry held up his hands in a placating manner. “Don’t shoot the messenger, Remus. Before yesterday, I would’ve said half the things in that fight weren’t possible, but they happened.”



Remus just kept staring at Harry as the thoughts chased across his face. Resigned, he nodded and leaned back on the bed again. After a long moment of silence, Remus snorted. "Sirius is so going to kick your behind, Harry, when he finds out he missed you taking on Dumbledore. And David is going to be really upset if he ever sees this. After your encounter with those Slytherins last week, I have never seen him so distressed. Well, not since. . ." Sighing, Remus tossed the sensory monitor back to Harry. "Sirius will want to watch that, too."

Harry stuffed the monitor back in its pouch. "Yeah, well, I'll go see Sirius and come back with a sore arse. Dad will be okay once we talk about it. I hope." Glancing again at his old friend, Harry knew they were dancing around the central issue. "Are we wrong about how magic works, Remus?"

Remus began absently running his hands over his face. After a long time of reflection, he shook his head slowly. "Occam's razor, Harry. We've been using it all along, and the theory we have fits all the other facts. Until we can talk to Dumbledore about what happened and what he experienced, we have to assume our model is still correct."

"What about those problems with the other magic styles? Did you ever work those out?" Harry asked curiously.

"I think so," Remus replied slowly. "From what we've been able to observe, it appears to be due to a difference in conduits. The real problem is how Edgar can do any magic at all, but last week I think I worked that out as well. He was supposed to be doing some tests with Sirius when you showed up to kidnap me yesterday."

Harry chuckled quietly. "You're hardly a kid, Remus. Sirius, now, well that would be kidnapping."

Before Remus could fire off a retort, the doors to the infirmary again banged open, and a variety of misshapen lumps moved by various forms of locomotion into the area. Close scrutiny revealed what appeared to be half-human, half-animal creatures clustered about the entranceway, all of which were wearing Hogwarts robes. Most of the

odd beings had animal heads, but there were a few human heads surmounting strange animal bodies. Harry thought they resembled a Dr. Seuss drawing, but the “human” heads were so alien in anatomy that they were unable to talk and could only articulate groans and moans. The cacophony that ensued as the roughly dozen students clamoured for attention and fought each other to reach the mediwitch turned the infirmary into a warped menagerie. Harry and Remus were unable to stop their laughter at the whole scene.

The end result was that Madam Pomfrey came back out of her office and let out a screech of indignation. “Those Weasley boys! Just wait until I see them next!”

Firing a wink at Remus and gesturing vaguely at the crowd of misshapen students, Harry used a quick Summoning charm to draw the curtains around his bed. “I’ve got to go have a rather grim talk. Cover for me while I’m out, right?”

After a fast Alohomora on the window, Harry waved once at his old friend before he leapt to freedom on his broom. Heading toward the lake, Harry speculated that with any luck, the matron would be so occupied that she would fail to notice the empty bed before he returned. Harry needed to keep his presence rather quiet lest word get back that he was out and about, so he dove for the tree line that encircled nearly two thirds of the lake. Opting to rocket around the lake just above the long-worn path at the edge of it, Harry dove in and out of trees as he raced for the far side and wherever Sirius might be hiding.

Slowing down as he came near the far side of the lake, Harry started scanning the grounds carefully for any traces of magical signatures. Finally spotting one bush near a clump of trees on the path that was radiating slightly, Harry came to a stop and dropped to the ground a few feet away from it.

“Okay, Padfoot,” Harry called, “I know you’re in there. Come on out.”

The faint rustling in the bushes ceased, but Harry could tell there was something large just out of his sight. When nothing came out, Harry cautiously drew his wand and stepped by the trees to get a bit of

cover before taking aim on the thickest part. Silently casting Aguamenti to spray water all over the bushes, Harry was surprised to see a pair of Nifflers running out of the bushes before heading deeper into the forest. Realising Padfoot had, for once, not set a trap for him, he relaxed and put his wand back in his holster.

Looking around, Harry was surprised when he found himself flat on the ground with a massive weight on his back pinning him in place. "Harry, Harry," the disappointed voice said, "how many times do I have to tell you, look up when you're checking an area?"

Groaning slightly at the weight and having been caught again, Harry's muffled sarcastic reply was almost lost in the dirt. "At least once more?"

After Sirius helped him back up, he graciously aided Harry in the removal of the dirt, leaves, and sticks from Harry's clothing. Pausing to look him slowly up and down, Sirius' face took on a sly expression. "So when did Pomfrey start giving out designer sleepwear? Or is it just for famous patients?" The humour in his voice was obvious as he absently fingered the collar of Harry's fleece pyjamas.

"Yeah, yeah," Harry muttered. "Just because a guy sneaks up on you he thinks he's entitled to all kinds of opinions."

Laughing a bit, Sirius clapped Harry on the shoulder before steering him back into the trees to keep their presence hidden from view. "Just because a guy is your godfather means he's entitled to all kinds of opinions," he corrected.

"How was last night?" Harry asked, diverting Sirius from his gloating.

Sirius conjured up a pair of dark brown leather recliners before dropping into one of them. Harry cast a Proximity Charm before settling into the opposite seat and smiling at his magical guardian.

"A little rough," Sirius admitted. "Remus missed the last dose of Wolfsbane since he was away from home, so..." Shrugging slightly,

Sirius pushed up his sleeves to show some faint wounds still visible. "He got a little frisky, I guess, but he was slow enough from his injuries that he didn't get me more than a couple of times."

Harry coughed slightly when Sirius stared at him. "Thanks for staying with him, Padfoot."

"Harry," Sirius began slowly, "why wasn't I called to help with whatever happened? Remus didn't tell me much other than to ask you what was going on."

Harry thought he could hear the faint whinge of indignation and hurt in the question. "Well, when I showed up to get Remus, you were out with Edgar," he offered quietly. "Dumbledore wanted to do some exploring, and we had no idea it would turn sour." Taking a deep breath, Harry looked back at his godfather and met the injured gaze. "I wish you had been there. You would've been a big help. As it is, we got our arses kicked pretty thoroughly."

With a sigh, Sirius held his hand out in front of Harry. "Let's see it," he said without much conviction. Harry fished out his sensory monitor and dropped it in the proffered palm, sitting back to quietly watch his godfather review the playback. Harry was not quite sure what to make of the fact that Sirius' face grew increasingly dark as he replayed the entire fight scene twice before backing it up and watching everything from when they first arrived on the outskirts of the Gaunt house. At last, Sirius stopped the playback and stared balefully at Harry.

"Harry," Sirius said sternly, "you completely bugged this up. You should be dead, kiddo."

Sighing heavily, Harry started passively counting leaves on the nearest tree. "Funny, that, since Remus and I agree with you."

Sirius continued on as though Harry had said nothing. "Not only should you be dead, you should have never gone there without some more backup! Dumbledore had the complete drop on you and..." Sirius paused to blink a few times. "You guys agree with me?"

Harry grimaced slightly and nodded.

“Woo-hoo! Paddy wins one!” Sirius jumped up and grabbed Harry by the shoulder, spinning him around abruptly while he was still in his chair. “Take that, theory monkeys!”

Laughing slightly despite the context, Harry regarded Sirius with amusement. “Yeah, yeah, even a mangy old dog has to be right now and then.”

Sirius calmed down after a minute and became more subdued. “Did Pomfrey get Dumbledore’s arm fixed up okay? She’s dealt with worse before, so as long as you made good time, it should have been okay.”

Harry had a hard time looking at Sirius, so he settled on watching the mostly calm lake water. “Err, that depends on how you define fixed up. He’s no longer under the sway of the ring, but he’s lost the hand, uh, permanently.”

Sirius lost all the humour in his face as he sank back into his chair. “Why?”

“Errr, well, you caught the point that the ring was a Horcrux?”

Sirius snorted. “Just because I don’t read books the way Remus does, Harry, doesn’t make me an idiot.”

Flashing a slight smirk, Harry started playing with a twig he picked up from the ground. “Yeah, well, maybe not. But the monitor and the Pensieve don’t show the auras and flows I see, as you know. That ring was doing some pretty wild stuff to the Headmaster, Sirius. It was clearly taking control of him somehow.”

Sirius just stared at Harry with disbelief. “Did I not just tell you I’m not an idiot?”

“Look, Paddy,” Harry said with some heat, “I’m trying to explain this the best way I can. Do you mind? I’m not even sure what the hell happened, so let me work it out, right?”

Sirius quickly held his hand up placatingly. “Okay, okay, sorry, Harry. I’ll be a good boy.”

Rolling his shoulders, Harry got up and paced about among the trees. “I can’t really explain it. It was like the ring was sucking power out of the ground, and it was pushing that power into Dumbledore. No matter what I hit him with, the aura enveloping the ring never flickered during the whole power transfer thing, and that alone is pretty damn odd.”

Harry sat back down and put his head in his hands. “You didn’t go far enough to see it, but the mediwitch needed someone skilled in Dark Arts to break the curse placed on the Headmaster. She wanted to bring Snape into it, but I told her she couldn’t. It got a bit tense for a while, but I eventually got approval to go get Crowley.”

Sirius paled considerably. “You didn’t! No way! Harry, you idiot!” Sirius got up and grabbed Harry’s shoulders hard. “The wards should have killed both of you for even thinking about it!”

Harry shook off Sirius’ grip before glaring back at his godfather. “Really? Thanks for telling me that. I already told Remus I can get around Exclusions.” Harry almost wanted to laugh at the expression of open horror on Sirius’ face. “What, you thought I was going to stay in my room all those times you did that?”

Gaping like a goldfish, Sirius sat back down slowly. “That’s not possible!”

Harry shrugged. “Yeah, well, it gets more interesting. Apparently, the ring had an incomplete owth Qayin on it.”

Groaning, Sirius dropped his head into his hands. “Not another one.”

“Crowley broke it. But in the process, Dumbledore’s hand had to be destroyed with the ring.” Harry shrugged. “I wish I could go back in time and kick Pavlov’s arse for rediscovering that one. It was better off left as legend.”

Sirius exhaled slowly. “Will Dumbledore’s mind come back?”

Harry shrugged. “Crowley said it was an issue of willpower. He broke the curse, but we both know that leaves some residue. The real mystery is why Dumbledore’s magic seems to be gone. He still radiates an aura, so... I don’t quite follow that diagnosis.”

Sirius was just looking at Harry blankly. “So aside from you lot almost getting killed, Dumbledore almost killing you, you almost killing Dumbledore, Dumbledore losing his mind and magic, is there anything else you’d like to tell me?” Harry winced somewhat at the slightly hysterical note creeping into Sirius’ voice. “You know, Harry, just in case it has slipped your mind lately, between you and Dumbledore, the big V has all his competition identified... you guys don’t need to be offing each other for him.”

“C’mon, Padfoot,” Harry said in an effort at a cheery tone, “you know he’d just be jealous he couldn’t be there with a big tub of popcorn when it happened.”

Sirius seemed unable to prevent the small snort of laughter that escaped him. Harry smiled at his godfather as the man slowly recovered from the realisation of just how much had happened in the past twenty hours or so. “Right, Harry, you think he’d want butter on that?”

“Nah,” Harry offered with as much nonchalance as he could. “Probably just brains and maybe a coupon for a free Unforgivable practice session on Fudge.”

Both of them started laughing at the imagery, some of the tension draining away. Harry, however, was quickly reminded of the gravity of the situation when his godfather conjured up a small glass phial.

Silently, Harry extracted a copy of his memory of the previous day's entire battle and placed it into the phial, putting the stopper back on it before handing it back. Sirius would surely be using the Pensieve back at the house soon.

"Ok," Sirius started over, "let's go through this a little bit. I'll spend the afternoon doing a full walkthrough when I'm home, and we'll talk more about it tomorrow afternoon. For now, let's think about the major things. Alright?"

Harry nodded and then leaned forward to see what Sirius Black would find. While there were definitely better duellers out there, and Harry had fought some of them, Sirius had a natural eye to dissect battles and fights and suggest all kinds of alternative strategies, as well as to point out when Harry was sinking into predictable combat patterns.

Sirius held up the sensory monitor and ran the playback to the point of Dumbledore opening the brick before pausing it. "First, Harry, you never should have let Dumbledore hold his wand when he went for the secret hiding spot. One of you guys should have stood back and kept a close eye on everything, ready with a Stunner at a moment's notice. You had no idea what was in there – it could have been a Portkey, it could have been a doorway, an explosive, anything really. What if it were a Basilisk? Eh?"

Harry smiled affectionately at his godfather for a moment. "You're really bent out of shape that you weren't there, aren't you?"

Sirius growled slightly before smacking Harry on the shoulder fairly hard. "Look, kiddo, the reason you needed me is because you weren't paranoid enough, and you needed someone to watch your back." The look on Sirius' face quelled any lingering humour Harry was feeling. "It doesn't have to be me, Harry. Sometimes I'll be working on things elsewhere. But you need someone to watch your back. This game is for keeps. It could be anyone – Cyril, Remus, someone who can hold their own. You see that, right?"

Harry reluctantly nodded his head.



Sirius bent back to the monitor and acted like the chastisement never happened. "Ok, I'll give you credit that you got Remus involved – that was smart – but the whole hiding place situation was bungled. Now, as soon as Dumbledore didn't respond to your demand to stop, you should have taken him out, Harry. You knew you were dealing with Riddle and his sick mind, so none of you should have paused. If necessary, you should have done one of your charm tricks."

Harry found himself staring at his godfather. "I'm so stupid..."

"Not really, Harry." Sirius shook his head, but there was no levity on his face. "You were surprised and didn't think straight. The next problem is that you didn't go for crippling blows up front. You tried to be nice." Sirius ran both of his hands across his face and through his hair, making it stick up in every direction. "Tell me, is Riddle a nice guy?"

Harry shook his head, knowing his godfather was going to lead him by the nose to some painful conclusion. Remus was always more subtle, but Sirius made points in a way that was completely blunt.

"Do you think Riddle would throw Stunners or Killing Curses?"

Sighing, Harry just waved for his godfather to continue.

"So why would you never suspect that someone's mind, controlled by Riddle, would do otherwise?"

"You think I should have gone for killing blows instantly?"

Sirius nodded slowly. "It would be the safest thing to do, Harry. It doesn't matter who it is – being under the sway of that man or his followers is equal to being that man or his followers."

Harry had a lingering feeling of unease with the direction the conversation was going. "Yet we know that both Dumbledore and I can throw off the Imperius from Riddle himself."

Sirius sighed as he leaned back. "True. You are the only two we know of that can, though Mad-Eye is supposed to be able to make it a stalemate from what I've heard. But was that the Imperius on Dumbledore? You and I both know there was something more. You said Crowley identified it as the 'Mark of Cain' curse. No amount of willpower can stop that, Harry."

Harry sat in silence, considering the words Sirius had been throwing at him so casually. The idea of striking down anyone under mind control seemed wrong somehow, but he had to agree that it probably would have to become the first choice in any repeat situation.

"Alright, Sirius," Harry said at last, "I'll talk about it with Cyril. Maybe I will have to go full out immediately, but I don't like the idea of lethal force from the get-go."

"Good." Sirius fumbled a bit with the sensory monitor before handing it back. As Harry put it away, Sirius coughed to get his attention. "The rest of the fight went about as you'd expect for a melee. The one thing I still think you're doing wrong is playing too much with your big knife. You need to find a better way to switch between that and your wand. Swapping takes too much time, which makes it a weakness."

"I'm open to ideas. This dimensional sheath you did works as well as the broom case does. I just can't see any way to be..." The Perimeter Charm suddenly went off, sounding like two squirrels in a chattering argument. Both Harry and Sirius dropped to the ground and started looking around.

Sirius nudged Harry and pointed. "Three, over there, coming around the path."

Harry groaned slightly. "Weasleys. Damn. I need to get out of here before they see me, and if they see you..." Flicking his wand, Harry cancelled the Proximity Charm. "Get going, Sirius. I'll be there tomorrow afternoon. Let Dad know we'll all be okay, right?"

Sirius gave Harry a quick one-armed hug before leaping into the bushes, changing into Padfoot halfway through the leap. A bit of rustling later, and the massive black dog was bounding off into the Forbidden Forest. Harry took a minute to remove the conjured chairs before Disillusioning himself and stepping back into the shadows of the trees to let the incoming troublemakers pass.

Fred's voice drifted toward Harry as the twins were hovering through the air behind their sister on brooms, while she was jogging fairly slowly around the footpath. "... changing the spells so those gits stayed Transfigured is going to cause problems, Gin! Pomfrey is going to have our heads after McGonagall is finished with us!"

The girl in question was trying to glare at her brothers but was breathing too heavily to do more than grunt slightly and gasp out one word at a time. "They. Deserved. It."

George shared a look with his twin. "Look, Gin, we're not idiots. Are you going to tell us what that was ..."

As the trio of redheads moved out of hearing range, Harry smirked slightly. He had a sneaking suspicion that if he were to investigate the reasons as to why Ginny wanted to train so badly, he only had to think of those students who were receiving medical attention in the infirmary right now. Suddenly overwhelmed with a desire to break back into the medical facility, Harry hopped back on his broom and took off for the castle.

Glancing through the infirmary window, Harry saw that Remus was once again writing on his improvised lap desk, while the curtains were still closed around Harry's bed. Harry could hear the faint sounds of the matron bustling about and complaining to others. Harry quietly glided in and put the broom by the bed. He closed the window and climbed back under the covers. Remus shot him an amused look and then nodded back out to the ward area. After taking a moment to make sure there was no lingering evidence of his unauthorized sortie, Harry used his wand to move the curtains back away from his bed.

Directly across from him was Hermione Granger, who was carefully holding the hand of a tall boy in Gryffindor robes with a giant donkey's

head where his face should have been. Upon seeing Harry, Hermione flushed brightly and dropped her eyes to the hand she was clutching tightly. All the other students appeared to have already escaped the ministrations of the woman. Harry noticed that Cyril was sitting up and watching the scene with a high level of interest.

“You Weasleys!” Madam Pomfrey was ranting on, while what was clearly Ron continued making a strange hee-haw bray. Schooling himself to keep a straight face, Harry tried to keep track of the methods the matron was using to fix the gangly boy. “If you’re not blowing something up or turning people into slugs or getting hurt during Quidditch, you’re plotting to do one of them! I’ve half a mind to get your mother out here to deal with you lot!”

Ron’s braying became more strained and quite rapid, at which point Madam Pomfrey simply Silenced him. “Do I want to know why your siblings have singled you out like this?” When Ron shook his head, the woman looked completely disbelieving. “So I don’t need to lay in a store of materials to keep you alive?” By now, Hermione was so red and uncomfortable looking that Harry was wondering if she had enough blood in the rest of her body to keep functioning.

“Very well, Mr Weasley, but do try to talk to those brothers of yours. I don’t want to see you back here after every meal, do you understand?” When Ron nodded his head, the mediwitch spent some minutes using her wand and two potions to get Ron back to normal. Leaving him with a sniff of doubt as to his prospects for continued good health, Madam Pomfrey glanced at the three longer-term patients and then went back to her office.

Ron stood up and glared hard at Harry before pulling his hand away from Hermione and stomping out of the infirmary. By the time the door shut, Harry and Remus were both laughing openly.

“I want to meet the twins,” Remus said after a moment of mirth. “I need to know how they did that. I’d swear it was layered with a hex to anyone that tried to undo it.”

Harry grinned sharply at Remus after thinking about what he overheard by the lake. "It wasn't supposed to be, but someone tampered with the prank spells."

Hermione gasped and stormed toward Harry. "How could you?!"

Harry held up his hands while trying to smother his chuckles. "I didn't, but I know who did."

Hermione struggled for a moment before her eyes lit up in understanding. "So that's why she was suddenly nice to him yesterday evening." Hermione held her head in one hand. "Ron's going to take the rest of the day to calm down now. At least this time he's not got impervious shag carpet for eyebrows and a beard."

Groaning, Hermione sank down into the chair between Remus' and Harry's beds. "Ginny's always been rather vindictive with her payback."

Remus smiled brightly at that. "Really?" After glancing at Harry, Remus looked at Hermione, who was fighting a small set of giggles at some memory. "I think Harry's been in suspense over what your Miss Weasley is planning to do to him for payback."

Harry groaned slightly when Hermione really did break out into laughter. "He told you about yesterday, then?" she asked Remus.

Remus looked puzzled for a moment.

"She's been bugging me to teach her how to fight Muggle style, Remus. I gave her a brutal test to see if she's really willing." Sighing, Harry looked back at Hermione. "I was surprised. Most people quit, but she didn't. Since she passed the initiation torture test, I'm going to train her."

Remus nodded his understanding. "I see. That's what you were referring to earlier when she was in here." Harry nodded. "And was this initiation similar to what yours was like?" Harry grinned wolfishly. "I see. Payback, it seems, is now due twice over."

Harry shrugged slightly. "That wager is still running. She's got until the end of the month." Looking back at Hermione, Harry waved vaguely at the older man. "Remus, meet Hermione. Hermione, Remus."

Hermione rose and shook Remus' hand before glancing back at Harry. "Harry, since you're here, I wanted to ask you some questions."

Harry held up one hand briefly. "Remember that kindred spirit I mentioned?"

Hermione slowly nodded her head.

Jerking one thumb at Remus, Harry just gave a benign smile. "That's him."

"Really?" Hermione's entire countenance changed in a flash, and she looked highly excited and pleased. "Mr Remus?"

Remus held up one hand. "Just Remus is fine, Hermione. Harry's told me a bit about you."

Hermione smiled even more brightly. "All good things, I hope." When Remus nodded with a wry smile, Harry had to put his hand over his mouth so as not to succumb to the laughter he felt inside. He was almost certain Remus would be plotting ways to get back at Harry for the casual introduction and transference of the inquisitive witch's focus. "Did he tell you how he's been avoiding answering my questions?"

Remus kept his smile fixed in place as his eyes started flashing. "Why no, he didn't, but then Harry has always been a rather unwilling student. He's not the sharpest tool in the box, if you catch my meaning."

Hermione flashed Harry a mocking smile while he glowered at Remus. "I've definitely noticed," she said with an air of playful superiority.

Remus quirked one eyebrow at Harry before looking at Hermione. "I've been led to understand he's got you looking into words and thoughts, and how they influence magic."

Hermione rolled her eyes at Harry's expression before turning her back on him. "Exactly. The boy's managed to give me enough information that I've narrowed it down to just a few possibilities, but I need some more data before I can be sure."

Remus smiled. "Well, I need to talk to Harry a bit more this morning, so if you've got only a few questions, why don't you try them out, and we'll see where that leaves us."

Hermione's smile, if anything, became even brighter. "There seems to be a dichotomy. Harry has made it clear that the words are important to learning a spell, but that the language in use is not. What he has not made clear is the division between words and thoughts. Not all languages can express the same thought, for example, so how is it possible that any language at all can be used for magic?"

Harry leaned back into his bed and covered his head with a pillow. This was exactly the question he had been dreading. Hermione was far too bright and had asked enough questions that there was a fragile jigsaw puzzle in front of her. She now knew that the world was not, as per the textbooks, flat. But she had yet to discover what new shape it was.

"Excellent question, Hermione," Remus responded. Harry could hear some bubbling enthusiasm through the pillow in his old friend. "But it's the wrong question you should be asking right now. The question you want to be asking is why do you need words or thoughts at all?"

"Well, if magic just responded willy-nilly to your impulsive desires, it would be terrible. Babies would curse their parents, boyfriends and girlfriends would strike each other dead with regularity, and so forth."

"True to a point, Hermione, true to a point." Harry thought that Remus missed his calling in life as a university professor, probably

somewhere rustic and idyllic. "But then if you needed words or thoughts to make magic work, then what difference would the words or thoughts make? If I said wooga wooga, for example, how is that any better than lumos? Both are really equally meaningless to a first-year student unfamiliar with Latin."

When the silence had drawn out long enough, Harry pulled the pillow off of his head and watched the two of them staring at each other. Cyril, meanwhile, had pulled up a chair silently and was contemplating the teacher and student in a manner strikingly similar to how Harry was. When Cyril and Harry made eye contact, they shared a wry grin before waiting for the two to come out of their contemplation.

Finally, Hermione snapped her fingers. "It doesn't!" she said triumphantly. "The words are only there to guide the thoughts! Once you've learned how to release the magic, it doesn't matter what words you use." Smiling with the excitement of discovery, she looked at Harry. "'Tweet, tweet', was it?"

Pulling out her wand, she made a quick arc and said, "Lumos!" followed rapidly by "Nox!" Concentrating, she made the same movement but changed the phrase, "Wooga wooga!" Opening her eyes, she was clearly surprised to find her wand remained unlit. Puzzled, she looked at Remus for an explanation.

Remus smiled kindly at her, before looking at Harry. "Want to tell her, Harry, or shall I?"

Harry grimaced slightly before looking at the puzzled girl. "Once I made that connection, it took me over a week of non-stop effort to get even the light spell to work, Hermione. Intellectually, you're correct, but your body doesn't know how to do it yet without the words."

Grinning, Hermione reached over and patted Harry's hand. "That's alright, Harry. I'm sure I'll work it out before the week is up." Standing up, she was almost bouncing on her feet, her wand emitting an occasional spark into the air as she let her happiness run wild. "Thanks, Remus! Bye, Harry!" Before anyone could get a word in



edgewise, she was bouncing out of the room, humming to herself the entire time.

Harry shared a long look with Remus before the two started quietly laughing. "That was cruel, Harry," Remus said with a smile. "As I recall, it was more like a month before you got it."

Harry smirked a bit. "But I was also a lot younger and barely had any real understanding of magic. Look at it this way... if she can do it in a week, she's clearly better than all of us put together."

"Indeed," Cyril observed. "She worked out that much of your theory in just a little over a week?"

Harry nodded. "I gave her some clues and would derail her from what we knew for sure is impossible, but the real impetus was seeing me do things her textbooks said are impossible."

Cyril rubbed at his beard absently before looking back at Harry. "A most promising young woman, Harry. Her insight might be most useful, would you agree?"

The overly bland tone his Mentor was using caused all kinds of warning bells to go off in the back of his head. "You can't be serious."

Remus looked puzzled for the briefest of moments before apparently putting it together. "She may be faster than I am, Harry. To date, we have no idea how you're supposed to solve our little Riddle, even if all the other pieces were in place."

Harry shook his head before staring at Cyril. "It's not that simple, and you both know it. No one has any clue what that whole 'power' bit is all about."

Cyril shifted slightly before looking about the room. "That's not entirely true, Harry. Albus and I were talking yesterday afternoon while you and Remus were amusing yourselves with the Gaunt wards. We both suspect it may have a very simple interpretation."

The absolute silence among the three of them was broken only by Harry's harsh breathing. Finally snapping out of his moment of paralysis, Harry layered Proximity Charms all over the Wing in rapid succession before turning back to Cyril. "Explain." While his tone was less than a demand, it was far from a polite request.

"Love."

Harry spent over a minute staring at his Mentor before the snort escaped his lips. "Right. That's just the ticket." Rolling his eyes, Harry shot a look of irritation to his Mentor. "The first problem is, I like girls. The second problem is, even if I did like boys, I'm not about to like him like that!"

Cyril shook his head. "Remus was right. You are a rather poor student, are you not? Your anger blocks your mind far too much, Harry."

Before Harry could retort, Cyril held up one hand. "Clear your mind of what you think I have said or implied, and listen to me, Harry. You are brighter than this."

Cyril calmly gazed at Harry for a long moment before Harry nodded his head to signal his readiness to listen. "Voldemort's mother believed herself to be in love with his father, but it was all a sham. She resorted to love potions and treachery. When he discovered the truth, he left, for there never had been any love. It was only a figment in the diseased, obsessive mind of a broken young woman. Riddle grew up knowing nothing of love, but when he found out the truth of his parentage and circumstances, what do you think his reaction to the idea of love became? Contempt for love, contempt for those who would feel it. Therefore, he will never consider it as a source of power, only something on which to waste dreams and a weakness in anybody that might feel it."

Harry had to agree that it made a modicum of sense, but it was a far stretch to go from contempt of love to having some magic loving power. Waving for Cyril to continue, Harry tried to keep as open a mind as possible.

“With you, Harry, what was the one thing that saved you? Your mother’s love for you. When she sacrificed herself to protect you, it forever burned into you the knowledge that love does, in fact, have a tremendous amount of power. It can apparently even stop the Killing Curse, something no one else has ever been able to do. The one power that Voldemort ‘knows not’ is the one power you ‘know intimately’.”

As Harry opened his mouth to raise several objections, they all jumped slightly when a cacophony of animal noises rioted through the room as several Proximity Charms activated simultaneously. As Harry cancelled all the Charms and Madam Pomfrey came running back out at hearing the ruckus, while muttering about dealing with those Weasley boys, they all heard the sounds of many feet outside the doors.

With excessive force, several Aurors marched in, flanking Cornelius Fudge, Dolores Umbridge, and Severus Snape. Glancing around contemptuously, Fudge pointed one fat finger at the mediwitch. “I want Dumbledore, now!”

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A/N:

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to cwarbeck and Chreechree. Thanks to Reg and random others for their aid with Brit-picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

## Chapter 18 : Inflection Points, Part 2

Madam Pomfrey gaped at Fudge for a moment before snapping her mouth shut. An open expression of disdain on her face, she looked like she was barely resisting the urge to throw the man bodily from the room. "Mister Fudge, this is a medical facility. Professor Dumbledore is in treatment and unavailable at this time."

Harry could have sworn that the brusque yet kind mediwitch was actually snarling at the short, fat, and pompous windbag standing in front of her with a lime green bowler hat perched jauntily over his ear. Floppy, laying on the stand beside his bed, twittered once softly. Harry was sure that he heard a faint murmur of 'lovely colour' from the Hat that was determined to annoy him wherever he went.

Fudge, however, turned a deep purple that was vaguely reminiscent to Harry of another blustering man in an almost forgotten place. "Do you know who I am?!"

Madam Pomfrey merely raised one eyebrow, and with marvellous indifference she completely ignored the implicit threat. "I know who you are not, and that is someone in need of my attention. As I have patients here needing my care, I request that you leave."

Fudge spluttered as Snape quickly stepped forward. "Poppy," he offered in a silky voice, "surely you can ask the Headmaster to join us so that we may... discuss things."

Before Harry could open his mouth and complicate matters, Cyril's firm hand slid onto Harry's wrist, both a caution and a physical restraint. Madam Pomfrey, if anything, appeared even more hostile. "At this time, I will not ask the Headmaster to do anything. He needs his rest, and he will get his rest if I have anything to say about it!"

Dolores chimed in, her voice setting Harry's teeth on edge with its usual ease. "This is the Minister of Magic! Since Hogwarts is a Ministry-funded institution, you must do as you are told!"

The mediwitch looked contemptuously at the somewhat bloated woman. "Doctor and patient confidentiality as well as my Healer's Oath preclude any such rubbish. In fact, by the Hippocratic Protection Decree of 1430 after the Great Duelling Tournament, I am quite within my rights to have you arrested if you continue to press the matter!"

A flicker of motion out of the corner of his eye drew Harry's gaze to the painting on the wall behind the Aurors. An aged gentleman in rather medieval Healer attire was sauntering back into his frame, holding a kerchief rather pointedly over his nose as he glared at the Minister and his associates.

"Now see here, woman!" Fudge roared at Madam Pomfrey. "I've not got any time for this nonsense! I need to talk to Dumbledore now, so go get him and stop this stuff and nonsense!" Snape, however, had smoothly stepped back several paces to the rear of the party while Fudge was speaking. Dolores was looking at the matron with what almost appeared to be anticipatory glee.

"Auror Shacklebolt?" Madam Pomfrey called. "I would like to press charges against Mister Fudge and his accomplices! They are attempting to bypass medical restrictions and violate my patients' rights!"

Fudge became such an exquisite shade of purple that Harry wondered how the man was still alive. "What?! Aurors, arrest this woman for interfering with a Ministry investigation!" Fudge was actually spitting.

Before anyone else could act, a perfectly chiselled voice cut through the room, causing everyone standing by the doors to visibly flinch. "And what, precisely, is the reason that you all feel the need to disturb the rest of the sick and injured?" Cyril's hand left Harry's wrist at the sound of the Deputy Headmistress' voice. As she swept through the room, her stern gaze caused most people to move backward.

Gliding to a stop in front of the Minister for Magic and Dolores Umbridge, she regarded both as if they were some unpleasant base

life form. "Do you need something, Mister Fudge, or are you just trying to create a scene?"

Fudge apparently recovered his momentum quickly. "I need Dumbledore, McGonagall, not his toady!"

The crystalline silence was profound enough to make Harry wince internally in anticipation of the consequences of the Minister's imprudent choice of words. Harry thought that the expression on McGonagall's face begged to be made into a picture at his first convenience and distributed around the school to quell potential student malefactors.

"I'm glad to see that you are still as eloquent and charming as you were when you were a student here, Cornelius." Given that her lips were so tightly compressed, Harry was surprised that the Deputy Headmistress could still enunciate each word perfectly. "I do hope you have finally learned how to Vanish a serpent. It would be ever so useful in your career, but then, if memory serves me right, you did fail to pass your OWL in Transfiguration, not to mention several other subjects."

Harry frantically began running the powers of seven through his head to avoid laughing outright at the various expressions on everyone in the room. The Aurors were all manfully struggling to maintain straight faces, while Fudge and Umbridge's flustered outrage was beyond price. Snape appeared somewhat ill at the revelation and, deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, quietly stepped back through the doors and out of the room.

"Now that we know where we stand, Cornelius, I believe Poppy has told you that Professor Dumbledore is unavailable for medical reasons. If you need to speak to the person in charge of the school, then you should speak to me. If you need the head of the Wizengamot, then you should be speaking to the Pro Tem head when Professor Dumbledore is otherwise occupied or unavailable. Last I knew, that was Master Tiberius Ogden." Glancing coolly at the Aurors one more time, she waited for Fudge to decide what to do.

Growling impotently, Fudge turned and stormed off. As Dolores turned to follow, she hissed quite audibly at the Deputy Headmistress. "This isn't over! You cannot treat the Minister of Magic with such disrespect!"

McGonagall's glacial features remained unchanged as she considered the ugly woman. Lacking any tangible reaction, Dolores turned and followed Fudge out, the Aurors sweeping after the pair. Shackbolt was the last to leave, looking back over his shoulder and winking outrageously at the Deputy Headmistress as he closed the doors.

As the doors swung shut behind the remainder of Fudge's party, McGonagall turned to survey the others. Cyril stood up and bowed slightly to the tall professor. "Well played, Minerva."

McGonagall's lips twitched slightly as she watched Cyril return to his seat. "I cannot say that I did not enjoy that at some level. But as we discussed last night, we both know this tactic will not work."

Cyril inclined his head briefly, while Madam Pomfrey hovered a bit in the background. "Minerva, what do I do when they come back?"

"Summon me, and I shall remind them once again that there is nothing they may do." Pausing to reflect on the matter, McGonagall flashed one of her rare genuine smiles. "If they push too hard, ask Cyril to arrest them for violation of the ICW decree of 1430." Madam Pomfrey looked dubious but went back to her office muttering about irritating and interfering men with their testosterone-induced egos.

Without a further word, Professor McGonagall strode toward the infirmary doors. Before she could exit, however, Snape appeared on the threshold and surveyed all of them, his eyes flashing. "And where is the Headmaster?" he asked quietly of the Deputy Headmistress. "I must talk to him."

McGonagall barred any further entry by the dour Potions professor. "You may either discuss the matter with me, Severus, or return to your quarters. I believe I shall order you to not seek out Albus again until he has sought you out first. Consider yourself so ordered."

Snape's eyes glittered as he debated the merits of the situation. "While I must say I enjoy all the rhetoric and... observations that have been displayed, if Albus remains unavailable for much longer, there will be nothing here to... observe." Looking directly at Harry, the man sneered. "Isn't that right, Potter?"

Harry waved cheerily at Snape and tried for an expression of adoration. "I've so missed you, sir. Where do you keep yourself these days? I'd love to drop by for a spot of tea and biccies sometime."

Snape's expression became even more acid, as if that was possible, before he responded with true venom. "Whatever you do, Potter, I can undo." As Snape stormed out of the infirmary, Harry was pleased to observe that the man was still refusing to wear loose clothing. Harry felt that Snape was truly a man of his word, undoing the prank spell with quite a bit of flair – flair for failure, at any rate.

Harry smirked until he saw Cyril's face. "I've warned you, Harry, that you are responsible for that man's actions to some extent. I know you are pushing your personal agenda regarding Professor Snape, and, ultimately, any decisions he makes are his own, but what choices are you leaving him?"

Harry frowned at his Mentor. "What choice was he making when he had more options open to him? If he's only going to choose incorrectly, I fail to see the point of keeping him around where he can continue to cause harm."

"Harm is relative," Cyril replied with more calm than Harry could imagine. "Yes, he was causing problems, but it would have been possible to contain him yet still leave him with choices. Your actions are designed to eliminate all courses of alternative action."

Harry could feel his anger flare at the insinuations. "You would rather permit that man to continue to influence and encourage malign tendencies? As soon as the any containment might be relaxed, he would undoubtedly revert to form!"



Cyril regarded Harry coolly for a moment. "I believe we should stop here to eat our breakfast, as you are once again not thinking clearly." Harry continued frowning as Cyril walked calmly back to his bed and picked up his tray of food. The Hogwarts house-elves had left one by each occupied bed, in all probability filled with whatever Madam Pomfrey thought they needed. Cyril paused to regard both Remus and Harry before he moved to the back of the infirmary and sat down at the large table across from Pomfrey's office.

Remus shrugged at Harry before picking up his own tray and following Cyril. Slowly blowing out his breath, Harry grabbed the tray just as Floppy quietly spoke up. "Not without me, this time, Mr Potter." Giving up on the idea of winning anything at the moment, Harry just wrapped the Hat around his shoulders like a scarf and joined his two mentors, reviewing and practicing a few deep breathing routines that Master Gata had taught him years ago to find his internal point of mental balance.

As Harry moved to sit down beside Remus, he reflexively cast a Proximity Charm on the table. Glancing around, he drew the set of curtains between the table and the nearest bed to screen them from casual view. Harry knew the Proximity Charm would alert them before anyone reached the threshold of hearing, and curtains acting as a visual block would keep any actions they engaged in safe from prying eyes. It was almost a forgone conclusion that Cyril and Remus would yet again discuss and review the sensory monitor replay.

Relaxing down onto the bench, Harry gave himself over to eating his breakfast. Remus and Cyril carried on a quiet conversation speculating on Fudge's motives or purpose, yet Harry chose to focus on his inner meditation and strive for the calm required to handle conflict. Years of the exercises had drilled in the reality that not only would he respond faster and more fluidly to any danger, but also that he received an unexpected benefit in the relaxed state. Harry had discovered that the lack of external distractions made it easier to contemplate things he would otherwise naturally avoid.

The voice that suddenly invaded his head was not entirely unexpected, however the mechanism of communication was. Mentor Feiner has a point, Mr Potter.

Narrowing his eyes, Harry considered the implications of wearing the Hat for the past week. Focusing his thoughts toward the vicinity of the Hat, he concentrated his Legilimency skills. And when did you figure out this trick, Floppy?

I've been working on it since you shared your mind with me, Mr Potter. Harry was almost certain the Hat had a smug tone to it. Just because it's not visible does not mean it's not there.

Harry spent a solid thirty seconds thinking of every vile thing he would like to do to the Hat but garnered no reaction at all. So you can talk to me, but you can't read my mind?

Correct. It's quite hard to just talk, Mr Potter. I would hate to try to do more at this point.

Harry let out a sigh, earning him a glance from Cyril and Remus, but they continued their conversation as Harry pushed the food around on his plate. He hated eggs without something to mask the flavour – salsa, HP sauce, syrup, hot sauce, something. The pastry, bangers and fruit would be quite nice, but the eggs mocked him. Given the all-or-nothing behaviour of the mediwitch, Harry knew if he chose to not eat them, they would probably show up in his breakfast tray every day until he did.

Resigned to get it over with as quickly as possible, Harry decided to just eat the eggs first and then savour something else to rid his mouth of the horrid taste. So which point was that, Floppy?

Love, Mr Potter, is quite the force to be reckoned with.

Harry wanted to groan that Floppy was once again on his case about something Harry had absolutely no desire to discuss. The Warming Charms may have technically kept his breakfast warm, but they had the side effect of drying everything out, especially the eggs. He was certain this conversation would soon be as distasteful as the eggs.

Do you organise these things with Cyril and Dumbledore to annoy me? Harry knew the answer would be negative, but sometimes it felt

like he was the focus of numerous subtle conspiracies. Sirius would be proud, Harry realised, since he was truly becoming quite paranoid.

Really, now, Mr Potter, the Hat responded. Is your ego such that you believe we all stay up late working out how to keep your mind occupied?

Thanks, Floppy. I'm really touched. The quiet snort of derision caused Cyril and Remus to pause once more and look carefully at Harry, but he was too busy ignoring them and trying to eat the eggs without tasting them. So you're a fan of the love-Voldemort-to-death camp, are you?

Must you wallow in absurdity, Mr Potter?

Harry paused to finish off the last of the blasted eggs. You saw my life, Floppy. Tell me exactly what hasn't been absurd so far.

The Hat went completely silent, which gave Harry the opportunity to enjoy a soft and chewy banger. I'll concede that point, Mr Potter. However, you know that your Mentor was not discussing loving Voldemort.

Right, Harry said without heat. I'll just love myself and be like that narcissist Lockhart.

Mr Potter, do you enjoy your life?

Harry shrugged without realising it. He caught Remus and Cyril staring at him and stared back. "What?"

"Talking to yourself, Harry?" Remus asked with a smirk. "First sign of dementia, you know."

Harry glared back. "Right. Since I have more voices in my head than fingers, where does that leave me? Oh, that's right. Loving Voldemort to death. Only a complete lunatic would do that, so I'm all set, right?"

Remus just rolled his eyes and went back to his conversation with Cyril. See, Floppy, I enjoy life. I enjoy tormenting Remus and Sirius and Hermione and... well, whomsoever I can.

You aren't that naive, Mr Potter. Happiness is not a state of intermittent sarcastic pleasure amongst a general dearth of positive emotions.

Pausing to reflect on the exact message Floppy was driving at, Harry had a vision of two girls giggling at him at the welcoming feast. So I'm a mildly depressed, cold-hearted bastard. I don't see that changing anytime soon. If anger clouds my mind so easily, then happiness or bubblyness or love or whatever must cause just as thorough an occlusion.

Harry was certain that the Hat found a way to sigh silently. Think on it, Mr Potter. Love is not restricted to some preconceived notion, form, or nature. While love does in fact occlude, what it occludes is far more interesting.

Ha! You gave me a straight answer that time!

Did I, Mr Potter?

Harry was left to stew in his own mind as he finished the breakfast the house-elves had brought for him. Since he was talking mentally with Floppy, whereas Remus and Cyril were speaking verbally to each other, Harry was done with his breakfast before his mentors and sat waiting for them to finish. It was evident from Cyril's earlier comments that more discussion would be forthcoming, although it was probably not going to be an enjoyable exchange of ideas. The last thing Harry wanted to do was engage in a speculation session on what a moron like Fudge might really be up to, since the fool only ever thought what he was paid to think.

When Madam Pomfrey stuck her head out of her office, she took one glance at the three of them before glaring at Cyril briefly. "All of it, Cyril, or you'll not have my permission to roam about." She watched patiently until the man picked up the first prune and started eating it.

Nodding in satisfaction, she disappeared back into her office, closing the door.

Cyril frowned for a moment. "Why didn't your Proximity Charm go off, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "She's already in the hearing range of the focal point. It only goes off when something sentient crosses in or out of the threshold." Without really considering the matter further, Harry flicked his wand to put an Imperturbable Charm over the office door. "Now she won't hear anything short of an explosion."

As Cyril and Remus began wrapping up their conversation, Harry dumped the sensory monitor back onto the table in front of Remus. As expected, without any prompting whatsoever, Remus re-ran the entire battle, starting from when Dumbledore first put the ring on and ending when the fight was over and Harry was lashing everyone together.

Cyril watched it closely twice more before he sat back and regarded Remus and Harry, his eyes hard. "You have previously seen the Mark of Cain curse that was placed upon Albus? You have seen others under the influence of it?"

Remus nodded.

"And do you know how it was learned by whoever cast it?"

This time Remus shook his head.

Cyril deflated. "I wish I could track that down. We thought we had suppressed it when we ejected Pavlov and Obliviated his memory of rediscovering it. Either he shared it with someone and forgot about it, or else there's still some book out there with the original version from four thousand years ago."

"Or," Harry pointed out carefully, "someone managed to get Pavlov to reveal it to them and then Obliviated his knowledge of them learning it. I believe that it was seen during the war with Grindelwald."

Cyril absently combed through his beard with one hand. "It was. That is also possible, and more likely, although equally useless." Shaking his head slightly as though to clear cobwebs, Cyril regarded Harry for a moment. "I know that Remus and Sirius will be discussing the actual battle with you. I've no interest in doing that. I want to discuss the Horcrux in the ring, the loss of Dumbledore's power, and whatever else seemed odd to you, Harry."

Harry exchanged a look of surprise with Remus before he settled down in his seat. "All right. I thought the whole place was odd."

Cyril smiled faintly. "Harry, you can see and react to magic in ways that we cannot. If an event or object seems odd to you, it's quite likely that there's something meaningful behind it. Would you be more specific?"

Scratching his head, Harry stared off into the corner of the room for a moment. "Well, there was all that magic that was just pooled on the floor. I think I mentioned it before the whole place went up. That really shouldn't have been there. And then with the nested wards, there were so many controls for such a small location... it was overkill."

Remus nodded his head quickly. "Those wards were unusual. If you had tried to bring them down the normal way, it would have taken a team of Curse-Breakers at least a solid week to determine how to get through them, let alone break them apart. I saw a weakness and exploited it because Harry told us of the flux line."

"Yes, your theory of how magic works. You believe that whoever put those wards there was unaware of the flux line?" Cyril sounded highly doubtful.

"No," Harry replied instantly. "Voldemort knew it was there when he put the wards in place. He had to have known that. It would be the only explanation for why the Slytherin line was living so close to the Muggles they all loathed."

“Perhaps,” Cyril conceded. “Do you think it odd that a weakness was there in the first place?”

Harry had no idea on even how to begin answering the question, so he turned to Remus for insight. The werewolf, however, was slowly shaking his head. “There’s no way for us to know. It’s possible it was entirely a trap. It’s equally possible he was just arrogant. Tom Riddle is exceptionally good at setting traps and being arrogant.”

“Hmmm,” Cyril said noncommittally. Reaching out, he manipulated the playback to continuously loop the short sequence at the end where Dumbledore Apparated in front of Harry and Harry subsequently shortened the Headmaster’s arm. “Why did you think to cut off Albus’ hand, Harry?”

Harry watched the scene play out in the monitor and in his head, over and over again. “I think it wasn’t entirely a conscious decision on my part. I knew I had to get the ring away from him, and I was getting very close to draining my core. Instant Apparition is... very exhausting. I could see the aura from the ring creeping up his arm, so I just went for it.”

Harry tuned out his mentors as they engaged in a drawn-out discussion of other options Harry could have pursued in dealing with the Headmaster. The entire scene where Harry used his katana to separate the ring directly from Dumbledore was disturbing for some reason unrelated to the violence itself. It kept flashing, the sword bright and shiny, the hand pale with loose skin on it. Visions of hands and blood from all the fights he had witnessed or participated in flashed through his head.

Harry finally looked back at his mentors and interrupted their conversation. “Why would it be the left hand, which wasn’t Dumbledore’s wand hand?”

Remus hunched forward, apparently ignoring the looping replay in front of his face. “What do you mean, Harry?”

“It was the same hand,” Harry offered slowly. “Why would the Horcrux seek the left hand? Peter Pettigrew cut off his own left hand for Voldemort’s resurrection, as I did to Dumbledore yesterday. I’m not sure why that image is sticking so much in my head. Why does the left hand matter in either case? The right hand for both of them is more magically powerful.”

“I am at a disadvantage in these matters, Harry,” Cyril stated simply. “I have not seen this place of the resurrection first-hand, nor have I seen the memories you possess of Voldemort’s return. I think it’s time to fix that.”

“Ever since the night Nicolas Flamel died,” Remus offered with a sympathetic glance toward Harry, “Harry hasn’t been terribly tolerant of suggestions to go back there.”

Cyril sighed for a moment. “We will have to return to Little Hangleton this week to see what we can find. These two events – the rebirth of Voldemort and the Gaunt House Horcrux – coinciding at that village suggests that far more is there waiting to be discovered.”

Harry could feel the blood drain from his face. “That place we went to... that was... Little Hangleton?” Harry was beginning to remember a haunting feeling from broken dreams during the medicated sleep last night, and the dots were connecting far too quickly. “The manor house on the other side of the valley?”

Remus was looking cautiously at Harry. “You didn’t know that was Little Hangleton? I recognised it from the battle there this past summer.”

“I suspect,” Cyril stated quietly, “that Albus didn’t wish to cause you undue stress. He knew of the events from the summer that transpired there, Harry, and how close your relationship with Nicolas was. For that reason alone, he would not have mentioned it to Remus either once you brought him.”

As Harry leaned back to consider the point, he could feel the tension that had built up in his neck and shoulders. Reaching back to



absently rub his neck, Harry started when the Proximity Alarm on the table starting mewling piteously at them. As Remus collapsed the display from the sensory monitor and Harry cancelled the Proximity Charm, Cyril stood and pulled the curtains back.

Ginny Weasley was slowly walking down the aisle toward the back of the infirmary, clearly headed for where they were all sitting. Having just passed the second bed, she was apparently startled by the abrupt motion around their table and halted, looking somewhat nervously from one person to another.

“Yes?” Cyril asked pleasantly. “Do you need to see Madam Pomfrey?”

“Er, no,” Ginny said quickly. “I was... well, hoping to talk with Harry for a bit.”

Cyril turned to regard Harry with one raised eyebrow. Harry shrugged absently to tell his Mentor he had no idea what she wanted. When Cyril kept frowning, Harry sighed and looked back at Ginny. “All right, Ginny. Take a seat, and I’ll be over there in a moment.”

When Cyril sat back down, Harry leaned over and glanced at both of his mentors in turn. “Do you want me to get rid of her, or do I have time to actually talk to her?”

“I would suggest you at least find out what she wants, Harry,” Cyril offered. “If it’s not pressing, politely excuse yourself. If it is of import, take your time. Remus and I have other things to discuss than just what happened yesterday.”

Remus nodded his concession with Cyril’s suggestion.

“Right,” said Harry. “Try not to plot more mayhem for my life. I know it’s a tall order, but a boring week or two would be pretty nice.” Smirking slightly, Harry went over and joined Ginny. The conspirator to the twins had seated herself at the head of a bed, so Harry dragged a chair over. Without even really thinking about it, Harry cast a few Proximity Charms around them and the doors to the infirmary,

as well as an Imperturbable on the nearby windows. After a moment's further consideration, Harry laid down a couple of spells to muffle the sounds they would make and induce a faint distortion to make it hard to hear actual words spoken or see anything clearly inside the bubble around them.

After the charms were in place, Harry took a moment to study the redheaded girl in front of him. It was apparent that she was extremely nervous and uncertain, her gaze averted from Harry while she rubbed her arms. Harry sighed and ran one hand through his hair, contemplating the situation. "What did you want to talk to me about?" he asked finally.

Absently pulling her hair free from the elastic holding it back, Ginny put her head down and let her hair cascade around her raised knees, hiding her face. "I wanted to ask about... about the training. You said it was Muggle-style fighting." When Harry said nothing, Ginny continued into the silence with a strained voice. "I wanted to ask you to help me with magic, too. You're clearly more advanced than even some of the staff. You know how to use it to fight, not just do spell work or conjure something. I want to learn how to fight in every way that you know, not just the Muggle style."

Harry was quite surprised by the request and knew his face showed it. "But, when I'm using magic it looks like you're scared of me. You always flinch from me when I'm doing anything with magic. In class, outside of it, wherever."

Ginny looked out at Harry through her curtain of red hair. "I am," she whispered. "You using magic usually scares me unless I'm already mad or angry or something."

Harry just stared at her. "Why?" he finally asked.

"I don't know," Ginny replied, lowering her head once more. "Some people just make me react like that. I don't know why."

"You're scared of me, yet you want me to train you?" Harry knew his voice was laced with incredulity, but the duality was hard to accept.

Ginny remained silent, though Harry could hear her breathing quite loudly.

“Do you think I’m going to hurt you or something?”

Ginny finally looked up at him. “No. I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t hurt anyone unless you had to or didn’t know what was really happening.” Exhaling slowly, Ginny crossed her legs and straightened up. She pulled the pillow into her lap, fidgeting with the sham over it. “Harry, you’ve already proven that you won’t mollycoddle me. I need to learn how to fight physically and magically. And while I may be afraid, I must do it anyway. It’s confusing to you, I’m sure, but... it’s just as confusing to me. I don’t understand why I react this way around you or those others, but I need to do this. I have no one left to ask, since none of the professors will help me with this.”

Harry leaned forward and scrubbed at his face. “And despite your fear, and what you’ve seen me do, you want me to do this? You trust me to do this?”

Ginny nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving his face.

“Are you going to tell me the real reason why you want this so much?”

His question hung between them for a long time before Ginny finally shook her head, all the while staring him in the eyes. “Your fight isn’t the only fight there is, Harry.” The sadness in her eyes was quite clear.

Sighing, Harry sat back and stared at the ceiling for a while. “Is there anything else you want to talk to me about?”

There was a brief silence. “Not right now,” whispered Ginny.

Standing up, Harry nodded once and then released all the spell work he did to isolate the area for conversation. Remus and Cyril were still

discussing things, so Harry sat back down and watched Ginny for a minute.

“If I do continue to train you, are you willing to swear an oath of allegiance to me?” When her eyes opened wide, Harry quickly held up one hand. “I’m not a tyrant, Ginny, but I do want faithful and trustworthy people to help me. It’s not a sovereign fealty where there is no free will, but that of allegiance and duty as a knight to a knight commander.”

Ginny wrestled with the pillow in her lap without looking at Harry. “What kind of oath?”

“To do as I ask when fighting, to use your skills as I tell you that you may, to keep the secrets you may discover, and to put your training on the line with me if the need arises. In return I would offer to train you as much as you like, within certain limits.”

“What limits?”

“I won’t teach you what Dark Arts I know. You won’t be allowed to pick fights. That type.”

Ginny was carefully studying Harry when he heard Remus and Cyril approach and stand behind him.

“Harry,” Cyril began, “have you resolved whatever issues Miss Weasley wanted to discuss?”

Harry shrugged absently. “Some of them, at least the ones that could be addressed right now. Ginny’s asked me to... well, to train her in magic as well as martial arts.”

Cyril’s hand landed on Harry’s shoulder, causing him to twitch slightly. “And do you plan to train Miss Weasley in magic?”

“Perhaps.”

Cyril seemed unhappy with the answer. "You need to choose, lad. Now. This choice cannot be unmade, so be sure of it."

Harry raised one eyebrow at Ginny, inviting her to make her decision in turn. They all waited silently until, finally, she nodded her head. Looking back at Cyril, Harry was unable to resist the frown that was stealing across his features. This particular agreement with Ginny was going to require more out of him than he wanted to give. However, there seemed to be no backing out of it now. "It looks like it."

Remus moved the chair over to sit in front of Harry, blocking off his view of Ginny. Remus' voice sounding in his head was fully expected given the deliberate positioning of the chair. You do not want to work with her?

Harry shrugged absently. Want is a luxury in my life, now isn't it? As you well know, my friendship with Ginny is rather strained and awkward at the moment. This will either bridge the gap or else ruin it permanently. How this goes will also affect how I interact with the Weasley twins. I think those two might be very useful if we need them. I dislike the risk of losing not one but three allies, and possibly good friends, in the Weasleys.

Remus frowned in turn to match Harry's own. Losing the Weasleys would also lose Hermione, right?

Harry rolled his eyes in annoyance. Naturally. You and Cyril would still be able to work with her like this morning, but if I become unwanted in their close-knit circle, it's very unlikely I would be able to do the same without causing a lot of damage or friction.

What about Neville?

Harry ran his hand through his hair. I think Neville will be a friend regardless, so long as I don't hurt any of them. If I ever deliberately harmed any of them, it would be dicey. He would understand my actions if he gave me the chance to explain, but his feelings for the others, and Ginny in particular, would be a hard test on his loyalties.

Unless my ties to him are much stronger, I don't think he would choose to stand with me.

Remus leaned back and continued to frown. Harry waited him out. He knew that Remus was able to make complicated plans work out for the best much better than he could, and when the werewolf put his mind to it, he could visualize all possible outcomes and their repercussions. Harry excelled at split-second decisions and immediate actions, but when he had to make any long-term plans, hard experience dictated that he listen very carefully to Remus' opinions.

Remus sighed slightly. You seemed to be getting along quite well with her before this. Do you think that this is really risking so much? Does she not trust you, or do you not trust her?

Harry grimaced a bit at the depiction but chose not to react with his usual sarcasm. Trust is an unpredictable thing. I've demanded an allegiance oath before I will continue to work with her. While I think we could have been good friends given more time, events caught up with us. It seems that, as usual, I have little choice in these matters. If I reject her request now, it's almost certainly going to further strain our tenuous friendship, despite what she may claim. I honestly don't think our friendship will survive at all if I refuse her outright at this moment. She will not tell me why, but for some reason, it is very hard for her to express the real motives behind her request for me to train her.

Remus leaned back into his chair. She's refusing to explain?

Harry shrugged. More like she's avoiding the issue. I can't say I honestly feel like pressing the matter. You know how I hate it when you and Dad get on my case about something I'm just not ready to discuss.

Nodding in resignation, Remus stood up and walked off with Cyril to work out any issues they had with how Harry's decision would impact the plans already in place. Harry looked at Ginny and saw the mix of fear and curiosity on her face. "Sufficiently skilled people may

communicate mind-to-mind. Remus wanted to know my opinion on some potential complications of whatever we plan to do next.”

Ginny seemed to accept this explanation. “They’re worried about how our working together would affect your life here?” Harry had to wince at how easily she made the connections, even if she lacked the knowledge to understand their import.

Harry smiled slightly. “In a way. In reality, I am here because I need to learn things that only Dumbledore can teach me now. If I could have worked out a way to learn it through other means, I never would have come here willingly.”

“Why?”

Harry absently began twirling his wand, unconsciously mimicking Remus’ mannerism of weaving a quill through his fingers. “The magical world of humans is incredibly corrupt and apathetic. I’ve no intention of somehow condoning it with my presence... my being here at Hogwarts could be construed as some kind of tacit or implicit approval. If I could see some changes put in place to fix the problems that bother me, well, I’d be more willing to stick around... but with the current system? No thanks.”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed as she frowned at Harry. “We’re not all corrupt or primitive, Harry.”

Harry regarded her with mild sorrow. “No, you’re not all like that, but those that are not do nothing about those that are or to those that they know are. So what does that make you? Implicitly corrupt, tacitly approving, or corrupt by choice?”

Instead of answering the question, Ginny looked askance at him. “So why are you here at all then if you dislike us so?”

Harry just sighed and looked at the sky through the window. “It’s not personal, Ginny. You’re nice enough when you aren’t plotting payback against me, and you can certainly be fun. My dislike is for the culture. As for being here... while there are always choices, Ginny,

in the end, sometimes the cost of each choice leaves one with no choice at all.”

Remus’ voice interrupted their conversation. “That is one way of putting it, Harry. I like to think that the more educated one is, the greater the number of choices one can see.”

Harry smirked faintly in recollection of past discussions. “Right, but at the same time, one also can use that education to see that the total number of viable choices one may have is quite a bit less than if one were blissfully ignorant.”

Cyril, to Harry’s disappointment, spoke up, effectively ending their argument. “Be that as it may, we must move on. We have other things to do today, and we need to resolve this. This task of training Miss Weasley will be quite taxing, Harry, so if you don’ t feel up to it, say so now.”

Harry shrugged. “I’m fine.”

Cyril looked amused as Remus snorted his disbelief. “And that’s why you’re confined to the infirmary, Harry. You’re just fine.”

Harry tried for a wide-eyed expression as he looked at Remus. “It all depends on what you think the boundaries of the infirmary are. I keep looking for a sign that says ‘End of Infirmary’, but I haven’t found it yet. I even looked down by the lake, so it’s not bad as far as confinements go.”

“Enough,” Cyril stated while waving Remus to pull the other chair over. Cyril cleared his throat before resuming the serious conversation. “You plan on training Miss Weasley in the ways that you and Remus have developed. Many of these techniques remain unknown outside of the two of you and those you have carefully screened. At this point, we cannot allow such things to be learned outside of our control. Therefore, Miss Weasley must learn Occlumency. Remus, are you capable of teaching her? Will you teach her?”



Harry watched Remus flounder momentarily. "Well, er, I could teach her the fundamentals, I suppose. I don't mind doing so... it would be good practice for me as well. But I'm not welcome here, so I'm not sure where these lessons would be held. Harry is actually much better at Occlumency and Legilimency than I am, Cyril."

Cyril shook his head slowly. "No, Harry will have other duties. He may supplement her studies in this as time permits and as the need arises, but she needs a tutor we can trust now. Perhaps you and she should discuss this?"

"Errr," Harry interjected. "We need to work out the oath first."

Cyril raised one eyebrow but otherwise remained silent. Harry looked at Ginny briefly before turning to Remus. "Thoughts?"

Absently twirling his wand between his fingers just as Harry had done moments ago, Remus nodded. "You'll need to release her from the oaths she agreed to in signing for the rings. They're too restrictive for her to really train with you. Then we'll put on the new oath. Do you want this one on a signatory basis as well? Another parchment of some type?"

"Probably," Harry sighed. "I may need to do this again with others later. The twins, for example, after our little contest is over."

"Would you prefer another magical oath, or do you need an Unbreakable Vow for this next step?"

"The same oath level but with harsher repercussions, I think," Harry said slowly. "The Vow is immutable, and if we fail to think it out clearly a priori, well, Ginny might die from it. I'd rather avoid that if we can."

"Me too," Ginny offered in a startled whisper.

Harry smiled wryly at the redhead. "Imagine the Howlers I'd get then, eh?"

Her smile was weak, but Harry was certain that she had real humour behind it. Remus started laughing slowly. "One of these days, Harry, you're going to run into Molly Weasley. What then?"

Harry smiled widely. "Well, I have this plan, you see... She just needs to understand that I'm a misunderstood genius."

Remus snorted at Harry before shooting a sympathetic glance at Ginny, ignoring the smirk Harry was giving him. In a stage whisper, Remus leaned over to the girl. "He's about as misunderstood as a disturbed flobberworm."

Ginny smiled again, albeit faintly, but kept her eyes averted as she fidgeted with the pillow in her lap. "Maybe," was all she offered.

Harry reflexively rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, moving on, old man. I'll let you work the oath out, Remus, just get me when you're ready for the signatures so we can bind it correctly."

Suddenly, Ginny's eyes took on a glint he could recall seeing at the opening feast. "Where can I get a set of pyjamas like those, Harry? They look... warm." Harry could tell his mercurial acquaintance was back, although her fiery nature still seemed to be a bit muted.

"Special order," he replied in a lofty voice. "Perhaps I can speak to the manufacturer on your behalf."

Ginny gave him a genuine smile at that. "Think they might be willing to make them in green?"

Harry just waved one hand in a grand gesture. "I'll be sure and ask." Giving Ginny a quick wink, Harry turned and waited for Cyril's nod of acceptance. He then left Remus to talk to Ginny and resolve the oath. Harry began taking off the Privacy and Proximity Charms from all over the infirmary, recalling at the last moment to remove the Imperturbable on the matron's office door. When he had finished, Cyril was standing a few feet behind him and just watching him calmly.

“I’m sorry, lad,” Cyril offered. “We’re going to have to go back to Little Hangleton.”

Harry nodded once, running several mental exercises to keep all the fleeting thoughts screaming through his skull in check. “When do you think Madam Pomfrey will let us out of here?”

Cyril regarded Harry for another moment before turning slightly. “I was about to ask her that very question right now. Perhaps you should rest for a few minutes, Harry, and put on the show of being a good patient.”

Falling into step with Cyril, Harry walked in silence back to his bed. “Cyril, if she’ll let you out, can you get my wards book and notebooks on my desk? And a change of clothes from my wardrobe?”

“I’ll see what favours she’ll deign to grant us, Harry.” Harry could hear the wry tone in Cyril’s voice as Harry climbed back under the covers of his bed. The ceiling was completely uninteresting, and the murmur from Remus and Ginny’s conversation across the room lacked enough fidelity to be intelligible. Returning to the basic deep breathing exercises of his training, Harry drifted off to sleep with flashes of knives and blood and helping hands in his head.

The next thing he knew, Remus was shaking him softly and telling him to wake up. Trying to sit up was unexpectedly complicated as he was firmly entangled in the blankets, having apparently made an effort to mummify himself in his sleep. Glancing around, he noted that Cyril had deposited his notebooks and papers along with a change of clothes on the small bedside table. Ginny was watching him with an expression he was far too tired to try to identify, while Madam Pomfrey was directing a house-elf that was dropping off lunch trays.

“You didn’t seem to be sleeping well,” Remus offered quietly. “I’ve seen you do worse, and no, you didn’t make any noise. This summer again?”

Harry shrugged absently. “They’re just dreams, Remus. The mind is trying to escape for a bit, isn’t that what you always told me?”

Harry was amused to see Remus wince slightly. "Well, Cyril wanted me to wake you up. It's almost half-past eleven, and he wants you to eat your lunch and get ready for the ICW meeting. Pomfrey is letting you leave for a few hours, but you have to be back in time for dinner."

Feeling mildly better for the nap, Harry gathered his clothes and headed for the bathroom. At least he would have the opportunity to read up a bit more about control structures in wards during lunch. The investigation into any complicated magical construct was always perfect to fully engage the mind.

When Harry got back to his bed, Remus and Ginny were waiting with a long roll of parchment and a relatively short sheet of paper. "This one first," Remus said as he handed over the long roll. "You know the incantation and the wand work required."

Harry picked up the quill and looked at the first set of signatures for Ginevra M. Weasley accepting the oaths for the Occlumency Shadow Ring. "Ginevra?" Harry asked with a quirked eyebrow. "Guinevere? A little bit uncommon for an English variant, isn't it?" Ginny narrowed her eyes slightly but refused to comment.

Shrugging at her silence, Harry carefully overwrote his name on top of hers as he chanted out a release phrase to dispel the original oaths. When he was finished, he carefully used his wand to draw his signature a second time, all the marks slowly fading away from the first set of signature lines.

"Right," Remus said with a hint of humour, "this one's different than the last one. You wanted stronger repercussions, so this needs to be bound with a blood oath. You have to bind this one, and then she can sign it and start her lessons with me."

Harry casually pulled a small dagger off his right hip, drew a line across his index finger, and slowly traced the edges of the small parchment with a trail of crimson. As soon as the edging was complete, the parchment flashed white, and the blood vanished.

“Thanks, Harry,” Remus said as he guided Ginny away. Harry ignored the curious look she threw over her shoulder as he tapped his finger briefly with his wand, sealing the minor cut. Scooping up the materials Cyril had brought him, Harry took his books, papers, and lunch tray to the back of the room to have a working luncheon.

The buffer mechanism is regulated by proximity to sources... some advanced wards are capable of storing energy... the drain rate is proportionally related to distance, yet reduced by chains... attenuation to fluctuation is critical... set spells may be cast from a ward if properly constructed...

Harry paused in his journal writing as he tried to work out the dichotomy he found himself facing. He had finished the book and understood now the basic theory to how most wards should work. Given his already unorthodox views of magic and energy, Harry knew it would take some time to reconcile the rather inconsistent and primitive view of the book to the reality of the world. The closing chapter, however, was oddly incongruous to the rest of the text.

From the outset, the text emphasized the limited capacities of wards, control structures, and the fragility of their construction and links. They were, in essence, a type of customisable bunker, meant to protect and erupt violently when attacked. The last chapter, however, implied strongly that as long as you were careful and planned for the unforeseen, a ward could be constructed that would release any spell upon the target, not just one of a handful of ritual counter-attacks. While it would take some minor amount of power to act as a trigger impulse to such a ward, the actual power of the spell would not be drawn from the magic wielder that triggered the spell, but instead from the modulated buffer behind the ward. The implications were both staggering and frustrating, as he knew from his earlier experiments that moving wards were too unstable to be viable. Or, at the very least, they were too unstable if constructed in the manner the text dictated.

“It’s time, Harry.” Cyril’s voice was soft, and his Mentor waited patiently for him to reach a stopping point in his thoughts and writing.

Nodding, Harry stood up and pulled the black leather robes over his black clothes and boots. After picking up his books and papers, he dropped the stack on the stand beside Remus' bed before looking back at Remus and Ginny, still talking quietly by the front of the infirmary.

Holding out a small rod, Cyril made sure Harry had a firm grip on it. "Let us go to Geneva, then, Harry."

oOo oOo oOo

A/N:

I know, it's a little on the short side for a chapter. It was quite a bit longer, but there were some scenes which failed muster and had to be excised, and several k were dropped.

For the Canon Police among you, in Book 4, Pettigrew cut off his right hand. I changed it. Feel free to have a conspiracy theory as to why.

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to Chreechree and cwarbeck. Thanks to Reg and other folks for lending their Brit-picking data, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

## Chapter 19 : Inflection Points, Part 3

With a soft pop!, Harry and Cyril arrived on top of the Palais des Nations in Geneva. Immediately they were surrounded by a collection of Swiss Federated Aurors, a mixture of men and women who had their wands drawn and tightly focused on the new arrivals. One in particular had his hand resting on a lever by a staircase, prepared to instantly raise an alarm if necessary.

For a very long moment, no one moved as visual recognition took place. Most of the Swiss guards took a step back yet kept their wands trained on the arrivals, while one middle-aged woman moved forward and extended her hand. Cyril said nothing as he gave her an identification badge, which briefly glowed blue. Satisfied, she handed it back, and the guards moved back to surround the Portkey terminal while Cyril and Harry moved off to the staircase leading down into the building.

While the League of Nations had been an almost complete failure, it was a first effort secretly pushed by the International Confederation of Wizards to try to reduce the likelihood of another Great War. The Muggles may have felt that the rapid-fire increase of hostilities started with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, but Dumbledore himself had demonstrated after the Second World War that it was Grindelwald's influence over the Kaiser that had fuelled the underlying arms race that had been the cause of that first bloody conflict.

Hoping to deal with the rapidly growing Muggle populace in a manner that would allow some modicum of oversight when situations became volatile, the ICW talked the early governments into forming of the League of Nations, and the Palais was built to house that august body.

With the failure of the League and the rise of the German Reich under Hitler, which was actually the revitalization and overhaul of Grindelwald's original plans for racial purity and the supremacy of select people, the ICW was more than happy to see the United Nations formed. When the Palais was converted to the focal point of all European UN activity, the ICW negotiated through their

government contacts, under strictest secrecy, a set of chambers for their own use.

The end result was that the Palais des Nations became the most heavily warded building in Europe. There was exactly one Portkey-and Apparition-capable point in a five mile radius from the building, and it was a small platform measuring five feet by five feet, located on the roof and under constant guard.

Moving down the staircase to the top floor, Harry saw Floppy shudder slightly before becoming a modest scarf about his shoulders. At the bottom of the staircase, they exited a Notice-Me-Not charmed door and walked slowly down the long hallway of the top floor. While they received a few curious glances from both Muggle and magical employees alike, their slightly unusual garb drew little notice. So many obscure nationalities flowed through the building on a regular basis that even walking the length of the corridor starkers would have garnered little more than a raised eyebrow.

Reaching a completely normal door in a hallway of completely normal doors, Cyril pressed his hand over the small metal panel where a handle would have been. Unlike Muggle doors, this was not a lock-less door to gently push open, but a security plate that only a few could activate. The engraved nameplate on the door was a calligraphic ICW/CIW – WM/MdG – Adjunct Meeting Room. With a soft popping noise, the door opened, and Harry followed Cyril into the room, firmly shutting the door behind them.

Cyril paused to look at Harry. “I received a notice that Edgar is unable to join us, Harry. There has been an emergency session of the Manx Wizengamot, and he was required to be there, as was his partner, Kenneth Manus.”

Harry nodded politely, waiting for Cyril to tell him whatever else he needed to know before they went into the meeting area. They were standing in a small anteroom, looking at a magical escalator that would take them deep beneath the building.

“I also received a notice from Vencil. Now that you are an Apprentice, Harry, you have a voice to use during meetings, but if you



are wise, you will let me guide you. I strongly suggest that you only answer direct questions from myself or the commander.” Cyril then turned and stepped onto the platform, motioning for Harry to join him.

Harry, vaguely recalling this from his two prior visits to the ICW’s War Mage Adjunct Meeting Room, followed Cyril docilely and tried to remember every detail of what he was seeing. As they both stood on the top of the platform, it began a rapid descent, spiralling rapidly around a central column in a manner reminiscent of the Headmaster’s office staircase at Hogwarts.

Harry had been to Geneva for many solo meetings with various War Mages and associated groups, always under the escort of either Edgar, Remus, or Nicolas – and sometimes all three. The room they were descending toward, however, was only used for critical meetings, official edicts, and formal hearings into events.

When they reached the bottom, they were both standing on a stone block floor, clearly in the Palais’ version of a dungeon although the ceiling was nearly thirty feet over their heads. A reinforced door loomed in front of them but stood open. There were several voices coming from inside, and the volume increased as Cyril and Harry approached the room.

As soon as Cyril crossed the threshold, silence fell like a wave across everyone behind the U-shaped table. There were supposed to be seven War Mages sitting in attendance, with three on either leg and one at the head of table where the legs joined. Kristian Vencil, the present commander of all War Mages, sat at the head. Where there should have been six other War Mages, instead there were two old men whose names Harry did not know. Each was seated on either side of Vencil.

In each of the other four positions, however, was a triad of wizards and witches clustered closely together. As Nicolas had explained it long before, when there were insufficient War Mages to sit on a committee meeting for any reason, three members of the ICW general body would be drafted to act as the voice of the missing person. Since the average witch or wizard lacked the heavy training in philosophy and magical theory that War Mages enjoyed, it was

hoped that using three people would lead to a more reasoned substitute voice than a lone person that might be encumbered by personal bias or lack of experience. Oaths of secrecy protected the discussions, but members of the triad were not accorded full and equal status beyond voting rights. The odd number in the triad, as well as the odd number in the committee itself, assured no stalemates were possible when matters were voted upon.

Harry was quite surprised, since the last time Nicolas returned from a meeting he had only mentioned one triad being present, not four. With an abrupt flick of his wand, Vencil caused the heavy door to close behind Cyril and Harry. A second sharp gesture deposited two comfortable chairs in front of them, letting the Mentor and Apprentice sit and face the assembled committee.

“Cyril, Mr Potter,” Vencil’s dry voice rasped out quite audibly, “thank you for coming. Officially, we are here to discuss the assignment of a permanent Mentor to Mr Potter, as well as some disturbing events of the past few months, but there have been some... requests... for a hearing into Mr Potter’s recent actions.” As he said this, it was quite clear he was glaring at the four triads of interlopers.

“At this moment, I have agreed to allow a somewhat informal inquiry to take place, time permitting. Before we begin, do either of you have any questions for me?”

Say ‘No’, Harry, Cyril’s voice echoed in his head.

“No, thank you, sir,” Harry offered as Cyril shook his head at the same time.

“Very well. Master Cyril Feiner has requested to become your full Mentor, Mr Potter. This is something to be decided upon by myself alone, and I have no objections to his request. Do you?” Vencil radiated the air of a man having a casual chat over tea, completely unconcerned with anything going on about him.

Harry offered a slight smile before answering. “No, sir. I would be fortunate to continue my studies with Mentor Feiner.”

“Excellent.” Vencil leaned forward to make a note on a bit of parchment in front of him.

Reaching down to the floor by his chair, Vencil pulled a small bag up to his lap before setting a series of clear glass vials on the table in front of him. “In the official capacity of Apprentice or Full Mage, as per your oath to the War Mage Council, every major and minor conflict or otherwise important event is to be collected in duplicate memory format. Thus far, you have not been required to do so, as Nicolas Flamel has always offered his memories which included your perspective. You understand the procedures involved?”

Harry had to swallow a bit, realising what was coming. “Yes, sir.”

Vencil leaned back and finished setting nearly a dozen vials on the table. “Take your time, Mr Potter. We need complete and coherent memories. The list of memories you are to provide us with at this time are the following: the battle in Little Hangleton resulting in the rebirth of the one known as Lord Voldemort, the major discussions you have had with Albus Dumbledore regarding the man formerly known as Tom Riddle, and the battle that recently transpired in Little Hangleton outside the House of Gaunt.”

With quite a bit of hesitation, Harry rose to his feet and walked into the open centre of the table, stopping before the commander. Slowly concentrating on the memories and sequences requested, Harry extracted copies of each memory and deposited them in the clear vials.

“Thank you, Mr Potter,” Vencil offered quietly when Harry finished. As he returned to his seat, he was aware of the intense scrutiny of every person sitting at the tables. Cyril remained impassive, watching events unfold as though he were mentally composing a shopping list for later.

The War Mage to the left of Vencil stepped away from the table and walked to a small alcove behind him. Pulling a large Pensieve from a table concealed in the alcove, he carefully set it in front of the

commander before returning to his own seat. "You may not be familiar with this, Mr Potter. This is a projection Pensieve. You will please note the additional runes on it. This is how we review those memories we officially collect."

Harry inclined his head, dreading the sequence of events he was about to witness. His eyes were glued to the first vial as Vencil deposited the memory into the Pensieve before activating the projection. As the scene flickered into a greater than life-size image in mid-air, Harry watched his likeness slowly walking beside Nicolas, the old man's hand resting comfortably on Harry's shoulder.

"We will catch young Pettigrew, Harry," Nicolas said, "have no fears here. Since we both saw him go into this Muggle village, caution is the word."

Harry watched his memory-self nod at Nicholas and stow his wand in his hip holster. As the memory depicted the two of them walking down the lane toward the village, Harry closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on something else. On anything else. The replay of the conversation that afternoon was like a knife on the edge of his consciousness, peeling away his emotional control one word at a time.

By the time that memory-Harry was duelling with a reborn Voldemort in the projection, Cyril's hand was clasped on Harry's forearm in silent support. No words had been spoken verbally or mentally, but Harry knew that anyone could tell he was a borderline wreck just by looking at him. The anger he felt at the man called Riddle was immense, and Harry was fighting the urge to start smashing things just to be doing anything other than sitting so still.

As Harry realised he was beginning to literally shake with the pent-up hostility he was repressing, he felt a cooling sensation of calm and peace rush over him. Opening his eyes, he saw Cyril had his wand levelled at Harry with a look of concentration on his face. "Calming and Refreshing charms, with a bit of Cheering," Cyril whispered quietly. "I put enough into them they should last you until dinner this evening."

Harry nodded his thanks as his emotional balance slowly spun back toward centre, no matter how the restoration was effected. When the memory stopped playing and retracted back into the Pensieve, the meeting room was silent as Vencil returned the memory to the small vial. The expressions around the table were a mixture of shock, disgust, and fear.

“It would seem our best guesses fell rather short of the mark,” Vencil stated calmly. “Voldemort really has moved very far down the road to immortality.”

When no one had anything to add to the comment, Vencil began slowly working through the other memories that Harry had deposited. While it had felt like ages to Harry at the time, he was surprised the collected memory fragments barely represented three hours of real time to playback. In hindsight, he and Dumbledore did have a lot of conversations not directly related to Riddle and his history.

With the rest of the memories finished and the room still silent, Vencil again waved to the man beside him, who scooped up the vials and left the table. Harry was curious as the War Mage disappeared into a doorway behind Vencil’s seat, but the far room was too well obstructed by the table and occupants for Harry to see into it.

When the man returned moments later and resumed his seat, Vencil cleared his throat to attract everyone’s attention. “I find that at this time, Mr Potter has been carrying out his primary directives appropriately and see no reason to change these directives. I open the floor for discussion.”

One of the triad members immediately rapped sharply on the table. “Before the discussion, we ask the committee to look into the other questions of the day.”

Each of the triads was nodding unanimously, while the three War Mages looked as though they were each smelling something unpleasant.

“I see no need to call for a vote, as it is clearly four to three. Mr Potter, if you would please provide us with the following unofficial additional memories, we would be grateful for your efforts. We wish to see your conflict with Draco Malfoy on the Hogwarts Express, the battle against the students of Slytherin House at Hogwarts, and the confrontation you had with Madam Umbridge at Hogwarts.”

As Harry moved again to deposit memories in the clear vials on the table, Cyril's voice rang through his head. Be very precise, Harry. Show not even a minute not asked for. Focus hard on when you want the memory to start and stop.

After Harry returned to his seat and the memories were projected into the room, the committee had a whole new set of expressions. Looks of annoyance, irritation, and perhaps even outrage were on the faces of the various triads, while the three old War Mages merely looked amused.

You must remain silent and impassive throughout this, Harry. They will try to provoke you. Do not react! Cyril's tone made it clear that if Harry did react, he would have a very unpleasant set of lessons when they returned to Hogwarts.

That Calming Charm was for more than one purpose, wasn't it? Harry asked slyly. The silence was all the answer he needed.

Once again, Vencil cleared his throat. “The floor is open.”

Harry found himself horrified, amused, and insulted by the various comments made. He noted that none of three the War Mages said anything, but rather the collective twelve people making up the four triads were all over the map in their accusations and disparaging remarks. Harry was called everything from an attention-seeking glory-hound to a danger to society, and his judgment was constantly called into question. Several people suggested he be reverted to Student status and forced to undergo anger counselling. One particularly brave witch suggested that he was far too young to have to face such situations, and that they should put him under protection while moving him to the Philippines for intensive private study for the foreseeable future.

While it was slowly becoming clear that some of the assorted triad members were concerned about his safety and his ability to cope with the stresses in his unusual life, the rest seemed bent on character assassinations and smearing everything with doubt and suspicion. Vencil let them discuss and argue amongst themselves for nearly thirty minutes before he apparently became bored with the entire situation.

Slapping the table with an open hand caused everyone to become silent and look at the commander. "I tire of this," Vencil announced in a cold tone. "Your concerns have been raised and discussed. I will concede that some minor problems may exist which shall be redressed. Tasking and Responsibility is my decision and mine alone, unless all six council votes will unanimously agree to overrule me into a specific set of goals."

Vencil waved off the looks of anger from many of the triad members as though they were of no consequence. "After the discussion, my decisions are as follows. First, Mr Potter, your primary directives remain unchanged. You will continue to push on all fronts to find out everything you can about Lord Voldemort and his history as Tom Riddle. His downfall is your objective. However, you are to remain within the law at all times, and I further wish to remind you that you have special rights – if and only if your Mentor grants approval and oversees you – for handling reluctant information sources."

Harry nodded his head politely, comprehending that this amounted to zero change in his life so far, and might even be a hint to become more aggressive.

Vencil continued as if Harry had not responded at all. "Additionally, I must now direct you at a secondary level to move to lower profile operations. You are to stop making open conflicts when it is possible for you to do so. Your Mentor will have the rights to add to, or alter, your minor objectives as he deems fit, but any change in your primary instructions must come from this official committee in person. No other form of change is to be accepted. Is all of this clear?"

Harry wanted to smirk heavily, but kept his face calm as he nodded his head. "Yes, sir. It is very clear." He knew that, in essence, Vencil had just handed the entire situation as a big ribbon-wrapped gift to Cyril. Harry had no concerns that Cyril would disrupt the efforts to bring down Voldemort at any cost.

Vencil nodded once before briefly tapping the table with his wand. "Very well. This meeting is now concluded. Cyril, Mr Potter, stay a moment please. I have some news to share with you."

As the various members filed out of the room, Cyril and Harry sat in unmoving silence with Vencil watching them. At last, when the door closed again, Vencil relaxed and slouched ever so slightly in his chair.

Cyril stood up and took the projection Pensieve gently into his hands before walking it back to the alcove that normally contained it. "Do you think it's the appropriate time to do this?" The question was asked so casually that it set many alarms off in Harry's head.

"Mr Potter," Vencil stated clearly, as though Cyril had said nothing at all. "I wish to show you something. Come with me, please."

The figure may have been slightly bent with age, and his hair had long since gone perfectly white, but Harry felt immense respect for the commander of the War Mages. He had read some of the man's history and knew that his life had been a constant fight for justice and the rule of law around the world. While he had never acquired the reputation for magical combat that some others had, the one thing that was universally acknowledged was that when Vencil was involved, things would be resolved correctly the first time, every time.

Walking up beside Vencil, Harry followed him to the single large door behind the head of the table. The door was particularly plain looking and again had no handle. To Harry's eyes, however, it glowed with a vibrant aura different from that of the surrounding walls.

Vencil stood slightly to one side and motioned for Harry to stand before the door. "Mr Potter, please touch your chain of status to the door with your left hand, and place your right hand upon the door itself."



Giving a look of curiosity that was soundly ignored by his elder, Harry did as instructed and was unsurprised when the door opened quietly on its own. Stepping into the room as Vencil put slight pressure on his back, Harry moved into a region of darkness in what felt to be a large open space. A few shelves nearby showed uniform cases densely packed together, with open lids and glass jars everywhere. The small amount of light coming in through the doorway was insufficient to see anything clearly.

When both Harry and Vencil were in the room, the latter closed the door behind them, triggering an automatic light to flood the chamber. While perhaps not as large as the Great Hall at Hogwarts, Harry would be hard pressed to decide by what very small fraction it failed to meet that volume.

It was crammed with aisle upon aisle of shelving, floor to overly high ceiling, with the shelves further lining the walls. On closer inspection, the cases were clearly made of leather and filled with vials, which contained the immediately recognisable faint glow and shimmering silver liquid of extracted memories.

“It is impressive, Harry, is it not?” Vencil’s voice was laced with sarcasm. “A testament to a time long gone and to what happens when you make an oath without properly thinking of the consequences.”

Harry stood looking at the hundreds, if not thousands, of large leather cases, each containing dozens upon dozens of small memory-filled vials. “This is really every conflict or major moment a War Mage has witnessed?”

“Unfortunately, Harry. Unfortunately. You could spend the rest of your natural life in here and never make a dent in viewing all of them. The knowledge has never been properly organized or indexed. It’s just so much information. Your memories are over there somewhere.” Vencil made a vague gesture to the far right corner of the room, where the dust was cleared away from a small set of shelves. “Cyril’s and Nicolas’ are there as well.”

Vencil walked partly into an aisle before picking up a dusty vial from a nearby case. "You know what the limitations are of such memories?"

Harry gave a half-hearted shrug. "You can watch it, but that doesn't mean you understand it. You have to study the material in context and in depth, just like a textbook, in order to learn from it properly."

"Partially correct, Harry." Vencil returned the vial to the shelf and motioned Harry to follow him back through the chamber. "The real problem, as I see it, lies with the representation that these are all the past and not the present or even the future. What does that suggest to you?"

Harry paused to watch a swirling silver memory show distorted images of centaurs and creatures that looked like a cross between a goblin and a troll fighting each other. "Only that you may find answers to the problems of the past, but you can't find answers to the present problems here."

Vencil said nothing but began moving forward again, taking Harry to the very back of the room. "Perhaps, Harry. You should think about it for a while." Harry was only momentarily surprised when Vencil clasped one hand on his shoulder before firmly guiding Harry through what appeared to be a solid wall of shelves, cases, and vials.

"Lumos!" Vencil's wand lit up the very small room Harry found himself in. "This, Harry, is the real reason you are here today. That meeting was merely a diversion, albeit an important one. You saw the wall we passed through?"

Harry nodded slowly while looking around at the few shelves with barely a hundred or so memory vials in the room. On a small table in the middle of the floor stood a very large Pensieve with two vials next to it.

"When the time comes that this passes into your keeping, Harry, only you will know of this room and only you will be able to come in here. Those who sit in proxy do not have the right to know what lies

within this room, although they are welcome to browse the main collection if they are so inclined.” Vencil paused to fondle a few vials with an absent frown on his face.

“You should also know that nothing may be removed from this room. These vials,” he pointed to two clearly isolated containers on the table by the Pensieve, “hold the memories of how the protections on this room work. After you watch them, you will know how to let others in here if you so choose.”

Harry began feeling rather uncomfortable with the sudden scrutiny of the wizened man next to him.

“Please understand this, Harry. There are only thirteen of us left at this point. We are all quite old. You are not. You are the only Apprentice we have, and there are no other Students. We will be dead long before you could possibly complete your training, and I firmly believe that the full ICW will disband the War Mages and release you from your pledges. That means neither that what we do should cease, nor that our knowledge should not be passed on. That other room is a great camouflage for this room, is it not?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Turn around, Harry.”

Harry turned to look back and was amazed that there was a large archway with no door opening back into the main chamber. Stepping into the chamber proper once more, Harry then turned to face Vencil and saw the archway again. “Some type of Fidelius charm?” he asked hesitantly.

“The first version ever of the Fidelius, actually, yes. It’s much more secure and unbearably more difficult to cast. And I have just made you the new Keeper of the room’s location.” Vencil came out to join Harry, and they began walking back toward the committee meeting room. “There are many secrets here, Harry. This large collection may even hold the answers to the mysteries of life. But the only things you

truly need to learn, should we fail to teach you in time, are in the protected room.”

Neither said anything as they finished their circuit of the disturbing hall of memories and moved back out to the committee room where Cyril sat patiently waiting for them.

“Now, Mr Potter,” Vencil said as he returned to his seat at the head of the table, “I wish to speak to your Mentor for a bit. If you would please take the Portkey he has prepared for you back to Hogwarts, I shall send Cyril along in a little while.”

Harry nodded once before moving to Cyril. His Mentor pointed out a Portkey on the table as though he expected the request and just nodded briefly to Harry’s questioning look. With a last glance about the chamber and a brief goodbye to Vencil, Harry reached for the Portkey and felt the jerk behind his navel.

The return Portkey deposited Harry just outside Hogwarts’ gates. With a sigh of resignation over the increasingly complex situation developing around him, Harry walked up the path toward the castle. On the bright side, nothing had really changed. Cyril would probably just tell him to carry on as he had been. On the negative side, it was clear that there were lines being drawn, and he was being warned not to cross them without great need, otherwise the full ICW might let him hang rather than uphold their own rules.

It was curious to ponder what the reality of the committee was when compared to the stories Nicolas had told him. Before today, he had only been in front of them twice – once when he had been sworn in as a student of the War Mages, and the other with Nicolas after the secret of the diary was revealed. While Vencil was there both times, the other members had been different. The transition from Student to Apprentice was a private ceremony with Nicolas, who then notified the committee of the change in status.

While he was lacking any real evidence, Harry had a sinking sensation that the long arm of Voldemort was at work behind the committee. Nicolas had talked several times about how many War

Mages remained, and the new number that Vencil had casually tossed out was a lot lower than Nicolas' figures. Either they were all dying of natural causes over a very short period, or else they were meeting accidents at a rate that defied mere happenstance.

Reliving the memories of the past summer even indirectly had been much harder to tolerate than he expected. He was certain Cyril would be talking to Remus and his father about it, but Harry hoped it would not require his going back into therapy. While he was not strictly opposed to the idea of therapy, it would be almost impossible to find someone he could talk to that knew of the magical world, someone he could trust, and someone to whom he could reveal even a fraction of the secrets he carried around with him. The Cheering and Calming Charms that Cyril had placed on him would probably last until dinnertime, but Harry was a little anxious about what would happen when they started wearing off. Past experience suggested that, since the troubling emotions were curtailed abruptly, he might experience a mild relapse of sorts.

Opting to follow the path to edge of the lake, Harry noted how few students roamed the grounds on such a beautiful, if cloudy, autumn day. A few were walking around the lake on the far side from the castle, and there was a group playing or practicing Quidditch, but otherwise it was quiet. The idyllic scenery radiated peace and tranquillity, and Harry would normally be content to just sit and admire the natural beauty of the area. Why more students were inside than out was a bit of a mystery, but perhaps they had homework and essays to complete. Mostly Harry had found the work assigned so far to be rather boring and tedious.

Would you like to talk about anything, Mr Potter? Floppy's tone was tentative and quiet.

"Not really, Floppy. I'd rather think of other things right now."

As he stood there looking over the lake, Harry realised that there was little to be gained by brooding over the committee or the past, and that he needed to plan some pranks as payback for various people. If nothing else, pranking would be an excellent stress reliever and distraction from everything else souring at the moment. Believing

there was no time like the present, Harry strolled to the side of the castle away from the small cemetery. It was a bit shadowy and rather cool with the lack of sunbeams that randomly broke through the clouds, but it was close to the castle yet obscure enough to leave him relatively isolated. An ideal spot to begin a bit of mischief.

Breaking off a few bits of a bush near the castle wall, Harry settled about ten paces away from it. Working through a series of Charms and Transfigurations, Harry slowly constructed a lattice-style packing crate approximately three feet on each side. He was careful to make the bottom a solid piece, while no holes in the sides or top were bigger than an inch or so in any direction. Satisfied with his crate, Harry rose and returned to the side of the castle.

A quick examination of the ground around the two-level effect of the shrubbery revealed exactly what he wanted. Casually kneeling down, Harry thrust one hand into the small hole at the base of a particularly gnarled shrub and felt around until he came in contact with a garden gnome. In moments, he had pulled it out into the light, and it began squealing and trying to bite him. "Geroff me!" was the incessant phrase of the gnome as Harry walked back over to his crate.

Dropping the gnome into the crate, Harry took a moment to watch it look around before it methodically tried to climb up one side. Realising his mistake, it took only a second to cast a temporary Frictionless Charm on the inside walls of the box, leaving the gnome squealing and hopping mad on the floor inside.

"Now then, what ye got there, young Harry?" The booming voice could only belong to Hagrid, who was slowly walking toward him from around the far side of the castle.

Harry just waved and ignored the question, knowing that Hagrid would either come to see for himself or else would just pass on by. Concentrating for a minute, Harry thought of the series of charms and minor hexes he wanted to layer on top of the gnome. Casting a short-duration Silencing Spell first, Harry then began the slow process of building a complex prank on an unsuspecting delivery vehicle.

“Yer not hurtin’ that l’il gnome, are yer?” Hagrid stood towering over the box, looking rather curious about what was going on.

“Hello, Hagrid.” Harry had to smile up at the man. He was always rather friendly and seemed ready to talk about anything that crossed his fancy. “This little fellow is fine, the spells are all temporary, and he won’t feel anything.”

Hagrid rumbled some kind of vague sound before he looked down at Harry. “And what do ye be wantin’ ter do with a gnome anyways?”

Harry gave Hagrid the best mischievous smile he could manage. “Trying to teach people some lessons in life.”

Hagrid started laughing heartily. “Ye mean yer playin’ a jape or two, eh?” While Harry simply nodded and wrapped up the first round of spell work, Hagrid just stood by and watched. “Reminds me o’ ye dad, Harry. ‘E were allus up ter summat an’ all.”

Harry put his wand away and watched the gnome walk around inside the crate for a moment. “So I’ve heard,” Harry said quietly. “Remus and Sirius have told me stories about their years here.”

Hagrid shook his head slowly. “Poor Sirius, I never could see ‘im betrayin’ James an’ Lily like they all says. Dumbledore told me ‘e were innocent an’ with you, an’ I be right glad e’s got awa’. ‘E were allus in trouble with some lass while ‘e were here, so I reckon ‘e’s still up to ‘is old tricks, eh?”

Harry looked up in surprise. “Really? Sirius was in trouble? He likes to tell it as though he was quite the ladies man.”

Hagrid chuckled like a mountain shaking. “Popular? Well, p’raps. I reckon it’d be more sort o’ notorious like. Did yer know I still got tha’ l’il bike o’ ‘is?”

“The Triumph?” Harry was rather excited by this idea. “Does it still work?”

Hagrid paused to scratch at his beard. "I dunno, 'Arry. S'pose it might, but it's jus' been sittin' in a crate fer ages na'."

"Sirius would love to have that motorcycle back, Hagrid. How would you feel about helping me fix it up, and we can give it back to him for Christmas?"

Hagrid beamed at Harry with such happiness Harry was momentarily worried the man might pick him up and hug him. Enough rumours of broken bones from an enthusiastic Hagrid had reached his ears that he knew that any overt act of affection would keep him in the infirmary for another few days. "Good thinkin', 'Arry. I'd like tha'."

"I've heard you were a good friend to my parents, Hagrid," Harry offered quietly.

"I like to reckon so, 'Arry. They were right special folk, yer parents, grea' together, an' they always had a bit o' time ter spare fer me." Hagrid looked out over the grounds as he apparently lost himself in introspection. "Dumbledore took me on at 'Ogwarts when I 'ad a spot o' bother, 'e's a great man, 'e is. Yer folks were jus' like that an'all, they didn' care nowt about what others thought o' me nor them. I watched ower 'em fer an age, an' when they finally got thesselves sorted I were right glad for 'em like."

"Well, I'm glad you have a good opinion of them, Hagrid. It seems like I'm not following in their footsteps in that manner."

"Tha's a right load o' tosh," Hagrid shot back with quite a bit of vehemence. "They 'Ogwarts pupils may not know nowt about ye, Harry, but the way ye work wi' Neville an' they Weasleys tells us owt about ye, clear as rain. Yer a right good lad inside an'all, I reckon."

Harry smiled wryly at Hagrid for his defence. "Maybe when it suits me, Hagrid."

Hagrid just laughed a bit. "How you doin' with tha' l'il lass, Ginny? She's a right decent sort too, like. Always nice with the critters an'all, she's got the magic touch, like."



Rolling his eyes, Harry just shook his head in amusement. "We had a spot of trouble, as it were. I think we'll be friends enough given some time, but life has been kind of hard to keep up with lately."

Hagrid clapped Harry on the back hard enough to send Harry sprawling on the ground by the crate. "Don' be a worrywart, 'Arry, you'll sort it out. She be givin' you a proper tutorin' in the morn, or do I 'ave to check up on 'er?"

Climbing back to his feet, Harry had a sudden appreciation for the warnings he had received prior to coming to Hogwarts. He tenderly rubbed at his shoulder, hoping it lacked the damage sufficient to rate the ire of Madam Pomfrey. "We've just got started, really. She's starting with third-year material and moving on, I think."

Hagrid just nodded his head. "That's prob'ly fer the best, 'Arry. I tried ter introduce a couple o' lovely l'il lads when I first got teachin', but, well, it didn' go right really. She knows what she's on about, an' ye should trust 'er ter move things along alright."

Harry smiled up at Hagrid. "Oh, I'm sure she's got the pace all worked out in her head."

Hagrid beamed happily. "I got ter go grab some stuff for 'morrow's NEWT class, 'Arry. Drop in next weekend an' we'll 'ave a look at tha' trike o' Sirius', right?"

"Great, Hagrid. Thanks!"

Hagrid looked once more into the crate at the angry gnome in the bottom. "I don't mind abou' a l'il jestin', 'Arry, but don't hurt 'em, alright? I know they gets out o' hand round 'ere, but I pack 'em up as I can catch 'em every full moon an' drop 'em off deep in the Fores'. So no hurtin' 'em, right?"

"Sure thing, Hagrid. You don't mind if I send a few off on the prank, do you?"

Hagrid shook his head before turning to leave. Harry gave a half-wave as the large man strode off, his tone-deaf whistling loud enough to make Harry wince in pain until he was far enough away that the intensity lessened.

Harry was just wrapping up his complete set of charms and curses on the gnome when he heard a strange keening wail coming from near the castle. Looking up, he watched as a faded white form shot out of the solid wall by the main entrance and started heading more or less in Harry's general direction. As it came closer, Harry realised it was a poltergeist radiating a slight aura. Harry knew full well that ghosts had no aura.

The poltergeist, which Harry could only assume was the notorious Peeves he had been warned about, went screaming past him, gibbering about insatiable women and their wanton ways. Curious, Harry put down the crate and gnome he had just finished charming and stood up to get a good look around. A shimmering white figure was drifting across the lawn, in approximately the same path that Peeves flew past on, as a pretty blonde girl walked alongside.

When they drew close enough, Harry could tell the blonde was wearing a Ravenclaw badge, and the white form was the ghost of a young girl. Both were giggling like mad. The blonde suddenly noticed Harry and turned her bright, wide eyes on him.

"Hello, Harry Potter. That's a nice cage for Frimpkiks. Did you buy it?"

Harry paused for a moment to consider the question. "I'm sorry, you have me at a disadvantage. You are?"

"Oh! Oh! This is Myrtle, and I'm Luna." She smiled widely, and Harry had to admit she was rather pretty, although she would probably be beautiful if she did not have such a wide-eyed expression on her face. As it was, she looked like she had her finger stuck in a light socket.

"Ladies," he offered simply. "I'm sorry, Luna, but I made the crate for a little project with some gnomes."

“Hmmm. Celery would be more useful. Gnomes don’t like to eat it.” With casual ease, she stuffed her wand behind her ear and waved Myrtle off. The ghost waved back at Luna before following Peeves’ flight.

Harry scratched at the back of his head briefly. This conversation was a decidedly different one from the norm. “Celery doesn’t really have the strength I need for a cage.”

“You have to ask it nicely, Harry Potter. Really, bananas just don’t work like that.”

“I see. Uh, maybe next time I’ll try some celery.” Harry was cautiously making sure his wand was pointed away from the girl, although his instincts were giving off mixed signals. Her aura was glowing with magical power, but it was flickering in crazy patterns that made it hard to gauge her emotional state.

Luna smiled with a level of compassion that Harry found unnerving. “She’s just lonely, Harry Potter. Is that so wrong?”

“Ah,” Harry temporized. “Myrtle is lonely?”

“There is that.”

Harry sat down slowly on the grass, amused that Luna came over and sat in front of him. “So she thinks Peeves is lonely and is trying to befriend him?”

“No, no,” Luna sighed. “Myrtle has decided that Peeves is going to be her love in this life. She just thinks he needs a little love and compassion, and then he’ll straighten up. That’s all any boy needs, really. I was saying that she’s lonely, but she has no one to turn to. Why turn her away from affection?”

Harry coughed a couple of times. “From what I’ve been told, that doesn’t seem too likely to help Peeves.”

Luna smiled vaguely as she turned to watch the waves in the lake. "Peeves is Peeves. We all need a little mothering now and then, but acceptance can be so much more. I'm trying to be encouraging, but he just doesn't want to let anyone in. Sad, isn't it? Still, I'll try for the sake of my friend. And, of course, for the sake of Peeves."

She was clearly talking with multiple layers of meaning, and it was uncomfortable to think about. Harry could feel himself closing off to this conversation and was deciding how abruptly he wanted to end it before the blonde changed tracks on him.

"Do you always cavort with goblins, werewolves, and vampires?"

The question was innocent enough, and could have merely been a rephrasing from some of the nasty Prophet articles lately, but Harry could tell she was not asking a hypothetical question. He was quite concerned with how to handle such a direct question but was more concerned with how she clearly knew that there had been a goblin here recently. "What makes you ask?" Harry tried to keep his tone even, but he knew he was scant seconds away from Stunning the girl and dragging her off to Cyril for questioning.

"I shan't tell, Harry Potter. Your business is your own. I was under the impression that they weren't allowed here, but you've shown that to be incorrect in all three ways. Or maybe that you know how to get around the rules. Will you bring a Snorkack here, too? I would really like to see one."

"Er, Snorkack? I don't think I've learned about those yet."

Luna failed to react at all. She just kept looking at Harry with her disconcertingly protuberant eyes. "Professor Sprout doesn't like you. And she really doesn't like your Mentor."

Harry knew his face was becoming an open book of surprises delivered. "I've sort of realised that. You wouldn't happen to know why?"

Luna nodded her head quickly. "Of course. Even the church mice know."

Harry just sighed for a moment. "Would you tell me why she dislikes us?"

"Don't worry, I have decided that I'll like you. My friend wants me to." Luna smiled brightly at Harry for a moment. "You don't look like Stubby Boardman much, and I rather thought you would."

"Who?"

"Your godfather of the lake. Stubby Boardman."

"Ah..." Harry was becoming quite alarmed. First the goblin and werewolf reference, and now some type of Sirius reference. If word got out that these characters were around, and specifically around Harry Potter, then he knew that the level of muck he was stuck in would get quite a bit deeper. "I don't know what you're talking about." Harry knew it sounded weak, but this girl had him completely baffled. Should he Stun her and take her for interrogation, or try to carry on the charade? She clearly knew something, but he was starting to realise she was not firmly attached to the real world around her.

Luna just smiled mistily. Before she could say anything, however, Peeves came back wailing in misery as Myrtle chased after him, begging him to let her take away his pain and be a good girlfriend.

"I'll be off, Harry Potter. Do bring marmalade next time, it tastes much better with the right questions." With a smile and a wave, the blonde walked quickly after the disappearing ghost and poltergeist, back toward the main doors of the castle.

Bemused yet rather alarmed, Harry turned back to his crate and pondered the extremely odd conversation he had just experienced. He was certain that she was talking about something else the whole time, but what it was exactly left him confused and slightly worried. He was absently wondering if Remus or Cyril would be able to decipher it all if given the memory, when he heard someone coming

across the lawn and looked over to see Ginny Weasley walking toward him. He sat still, unconsciously running a hand through his hair as he alternately watched Ginny's approach and the slow rippling of the waves on the lake. Taking a few breaths, Harry tried to get his mental balance back before the incoming walking paradox could discern his momentary confusion and exploit the weakness.

"Harry," Ginny interrupted his train of calming thoughts, "Luna told me I could find you out here."

"Oh? You know Luna?" Harry paused to consider the redhead briefly. She seemed more positive, more upbeat, and calmer than he had seen her in a while. Harry slowly realised that the last time he had seen her like this was before the whole fiasco that led to St Mungo's. Thinking back to his unusual conversation with the Ravenclaw, Harry grimaced slightly. "I found her most... interesting."

The expression on Harry's face was enough to get Ginny grinning at him. "She's an old friend. What's the matter? She didn't hurt your brain, did she?"

Harry shot her a wry look before he turned back to enchanting the prank he was building. Ginny kept trying to move around Harry to see inside the crate, but Harry strove to block her access every time she tried.

Finally giving in to the impromptu contest, Ginny leaned back to look at the crate from the side while rubbing on her arms absently. "What are you doing?"

"I'm working on an art project." Harry grinned, knowing how useless that answer was.

"Right. It looks like a box. Very creative." The mild sarcasm made him smile even more.

"Oh? You disbelieve me? Well... maybe I'm creating a joke."

“Really?” Ginny tried to lean over again, only to have Harry finally slide over a little so she could see into the crate. One garden gnome was looking up at her from the inside, its mouth working soundlessly. “What have you done to that poor gnome?”

Harry smiled. “Well, I might have Silenced him.”

“Why?”

“So he stops talking, of course.”

Ginny sighed. “They don’t usually say much. Why was his talk bothering you?”

Harry unconsciously adopted a sly expression. “Ever heard of Tourette’s Syndrome?” Ginny shook her head slowly. “Well, it’s mostly a Muggle thing as far as I know. It’s a bit of a brain disorder that sometimes causes people to swear uncontrollably, using some really vulgar language.”

“Oookaaay,” Ginny offered. “So why does that matter here?”

“Well,” Harry temporized, “I may have infected this gnome with something that will make him act like that. It’s not permanent, but he does say shockingly inappropriate things.”

“Such as?”

“That would be telling, that would.” Harry smirked. “Sorry, no can do.”

Ginny frowned as she stared at Harry for a long moment. “It’s nothing that hurts the gnome, is it?”

Harry shook his head. “No, he shouldn’t even notice. As far as the gnome can tell, or any other gnome for that matter, it’s just a substitution of certain phrases for other things. The gnome would intend to say ‘Get off me’, for example, but what you would hear, Miss Weasley, would make you... surprised. But other infected gnomes

just hear 'Get off me' as if nothing was wrong. They just talk a bit more than usual... well, okay, maybe a lot more."

"Hmmm." Ginny watched the gnome walk in circles inside the crate. "Why do you keep saying 'infected' when you talk about him?"

"That's the beauty of it," Harry offered. "It's viral, you know, like a sickness? Another gnome comes within a few feet, and that one becomes infected too. So with just a few gnomes, I can send this crate off and be assured that the target has a garden full of obnoxious gnomes for a few days."

Ginny tapped her chin for a moment. "So why is there only one gnome here?"

"Oh, I was just finishing up the charms work. Now I need to catch more so this one can infect the others."

Ginny looked around. "I'm surprised you found one, actually. I've never seen them here at Hogwarts."

"Really?" Harry was astonished that she clearly lacked knowledge of gnomes. Perhaps Hagrid's curriculum overlooked the silly little creatures. "They're all over. Gnomes indirectly feed on the magic residue around wizards and witches, didn't you know that? And since most magical folk live around high areas of magic, the gnomes show up like... well... magic. They tend to drift a bit too, but mostly they follow the concentration of magic from place to place."

"Oh," said Ginny quietly. "That's not in any of the books I've read. Where did you learn that?"

Harry just shrugged absently as he sat down and began charming the ground in front of him to radiate large amounts of magic. By creating a small ward buffer but designing it with a hole, it was sucking up ambient magical energy and slowly pouring it onto the ground. As the magical energy rolled away from the deliberately broken ward buffer, it looked like raw energy creeping toward the shrubberies at the base of the castle.



Within moments, gnomes started popping up and playing in the small stream of energy. Harry could see Ginny as she smiled, watching the gnomes jump about. It only took a minute or two before some of them began walking back toward Harry, perceiving that the source was closer to the humans. They were cautious, but as Harry and Ginny made no moves to bother them, eventually almost a dozen were frolicking at their feet.

With a slow and careful movement, Harry conjured a large net over the playing gnomes and dropped it. As soon as they were trapped, they all started thrashing about until Harry Stunned them all, one at a time. When they were all down, he cancelled the deformed ward buffer and shooed away the other gnomes that had starting coming closer to investigate what was going on. As they scurried off, Harry scooped up the captured gnomes and placed them all in the crate, Vanishing the net and watching them all for a moment.

Ginny leaned over and saw the lone conscious gnome poking and prodding the recent additions before it turned and shook a tiny fist at the two humans. Smiling slightly, she gave Harry an amused glance as she buried her hands in her pockets. "I don't think your children are very happy with you, Harry."

Ignoring the barb, Harry cast an Imperturbable Charm on the crate before he revived all the Stunned gnomes. With one last twist, he removed the Frictionless Charm inside the crate and swung the lid closed with a soft thud!

Flashing a tight smile at Ginny, Harry promptly began casting a series of charms on the crate. Occasionally he had to pause to shoo away a curious gnome, amused that they apparently failed to understand the danger when their comrades disappeared en masse.

"So, Harry," Ginny called, pacing around while Harry worked, "why did you take the map off me?"

Harry shrugged and kept working. "At first, I didn't know what it was, but I don't like objects unfamiliar to me close to my person. Portkeys, cursed objects, all kinds of nastiness can catch you that way."

Ginny arched one eyebrow in apparent disbelief, shivering in the non-existent breeze. "You are a bit paranoid, aren't you?"

Harry rolled his eyes but ignored the question. She doesn't know the half of it, Floppy's voice sounded in his head.

Shut up, Floppy. Harry paused to stare at the sky for a moment. "What do you need the map so badly for, anyway? By now you know all the secret passageways and such. I can't imagine you need it just to pull a couple of random pranks."

Harry's question effectively silenced Ginny.

"I want to be able to avoid certain people," Ginny said after a moment. Harry was surprised that she had admitted something for the first time, even if it was rather non-specific.

"Oh? Too many blokes trying to get a date?"

"Oh, very funny, Mr Dark Lord Potter." Shaking her head, she looked at Harry with pity. "Are you jealous?"

Harry knew he had walked into that one. "Of what? I don't like blokes like that."

Grinning as she flushed slightly, Harry turned away from her. Content that the crate was secure, a proper temporary living space, and silent from the outside, he began the pack of charms to carefully shrink the crate down as well as lighten it. When it was finally set, Harry cast a quick charm to Summon a school owl down from the Owlery. As he waited for it to arrive, he conjured a bit of parchment and an envelope for it. When the owl arrived moments later, to Ginny's open surprise, Harry carefully tied on the shrunken crate package but told the owl to wait a moment.

With as much casualness as he could muster, Harry pulled out a piece of parchment and asked Ginny if she would hold it for him while he charmed it to revert the crate and forcibly open it when it reached the recipient. "Will you tell me who you're pranking?"

"Sure, just let me finish this bit first, right? I need to get this done quickly, or else I'll have to start all over." Harry had no problems tossing out random misinformation. After all, it really would require starting over if he failed to finish the spells within a day or two.

She cautiously took the sheet from him, whereupon he quickly cast several spells on it, ignoring her wince as the spells flew toward her outstretched hands. When the sheet stopped glowing, he took it back from her and scribbled a quick note on the sheet, before folding it up into the envelope and writing a name on the outside. Harry was thoroughly careful to not allow Ginny to see the name or contents as he secured it to the miniature package. With the letter attached and some whispered instructions, the owl swept off into the sky, streaking in a somewhat southerly direction.

"So now will you tell me who you just pranked?"

Harry grinned. "Your mum."

"What?!" Ginny stared at Harry, incredulous. "You wanted me to hold that for some other reason, didn't you?"

Harry nodded happily. "Only your mum can touch that parchment now. And when she does, the crate will pop open, the gnomes will run all over the place, and they will rapidly infect all the other gnomes around your house. Don't worry, it wears off after a few days."

Growling slightly, Ginny leaned toward him. "And what if I hadn't been here?"

Harry waved the question away. "I was going to set off some explosions. I'm fairly certain that would lure your brothers out here in a heartbeat."

Ginny stared at him in consternation for a minute, and then, flashing him a bright smile, she began laughing delightedly. "That's brilliant. I can't believe I just helped you prank her. I suppose I should be upset with you, but now I can't wait to see what she does to get back at you." She paused in her laughter, and Harry suddenly found himself at the business end of a wand. "But, Harry Potter, if she learns of my inadvertent help, you will not be happy. Clear?"

Harry joined her in laughing as he motioned her to head back into the castle. As they walked up the path toward the main entrance and Ginny put her wand away, Harry could just feel it in his bones that Mrs. Weasley would be thrilled to receive the latest volley in their little squabble.

"Harry, what will you do when you finally run into my mum?"

Harry grinned evilly. "I'll win her over, of course, with my amazing charm and good looks."

"Think much of yourself, do you?" Ginny shook her head at his statement. "You clearly haven't looked in a mirror lately, since only the blind could believe that statement."

"Awww," Harry complained, "tell me how you really feel."

"I'd really rather not, thanks all the same." Ginny pulled a face at him for a moment before she settled into a smirk.

"Fine," Harry sighed. "Climb all over my delicate sensibilities."

Ginny visibly steeled herself before giving Harry a direct look. "I want my map back," she said abruptly.

Chuckling, Harry just shook his head. "It's not yours to claim. It belongs to the creators. Filch swiped it from them one night but couldn't activate it, so he locked it up. I'd like to know how you got it, actually."

“I disagree. I think when they lost it and didn’t get it back, it became fair game.” Ginny grinned at Harry. “And I told you, Fred and George gave it to me. I don’t know how they got it, other than they said they found it in Filch’s cabinets.”

“Hmmm,” Harry said noncommittally. “Sounds like I need to ask the twins, then. Have you found where my room is?”

Ginny scowled and narrowed her eyes. “As a matter of fact, none of us can find it. I’ve had the twins and Hermione helping me. Neville offered to help as well, but he hasn’t had the time yet to look.”

Harry laughed lightly. “Well, if you find it, you know what you need to do to get the map back.” Harry glanced over at the redhead and laughed again at her irritated expression. “Or, you could just be really nice to me, and I can ask them about making another.”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed even further. “You know who they are, then?”

“You read that note last night, you know the answer,” was Harry’s vague reply. “Don’t pretend otherwise.”

“So why did you sign it ‘Howler’ rather than Harry?”

Harry grinned without looking at her. “It’s kind of a code, I suppose.” Harry moved through the doors to the entrance hall but held the door a moment to let Ginny go past him.

Glancing down, Harry realised that Ginny was still wearing shoes that were completely useless for training in. No substantial protection, light weight, little traction, they were the type of shoes people wore when their biggest concerns were what to have for dinner or what book to read. Mildly annoyed she was still wearing those shoes which he specifically told her to change, he subtly drew a quick pattern in the air and turned her shoes into large pink bunny slippers that squeaked on every other step.

“Harry!” Ginny’s irritation was almost palpable as she stopped dead in the entrance hall, staring at her slippers. “What the hell was that

for?!” She promptly tried to kick him, but Harry stepped out of the way and resumed walking toward the staircase.

“Didn’t I tell you to wear better shoes than that?” Harry asked as she caught back up to him in his walk to the hospital wing. Since it would be getting dark soon, Harry wanted to talk to Remus before his friend had to go back to the Shrieking Shack again. He knew Sirius would arrange to be at the Shack as support, but he also knew that the matron would definitely not let Harry go as well to keep Remus company, despite any assurances of his own safety. “Those shoes are about as useful as slippers, so you might as well have slippers. At least those keep your feet warm. And that colour looks horrible on you, by the way. Never wear pink. Or red I suppose. Eugh.”

Ginny flushed slightly before looking away from Harry. “I don’t have anything better than these, Harry.” Her voice was quiet, and it was obvious to Harry that she was incredibly uncomfortable with admitting this.

“Oh.” Harry paused to reflect on the situation for a moment. “I’ll take care of it, then,” he offered while flicking his wand at her slippers and changing them back to her normal shoes. “You can’t really Transfigure or conjure something as good as what Muggles can make. It’s too hard to wrap all the details into your mind when you do the spell work. I’ll get someone to pick you up the proper stuff.”

If anything, Ginny flushed even darker. “You don’t need to do that,” she said very quietly. “I’ll manage.”

Harry shook his head as they reached the corridor to the Infirmary. “No, you won’t. You want training, I agreed to provide it, so get over it. You need this. And you’ll accept it. If I need to call for your help, you’re no good if you can’t move right.”

There was absolute silence between them as they continued to approach the Infirmary. “By the way, Harry, everyone knows redheads don’t wear pink, burgundy or most shades of red, for that matter. Well, unless they are colour blind.”

Chuckling, Harry walked through the doors to the hospital wing and left Ginny to follow along in an almost comfortable silence. Striding over to his friend's bed, Harry dropped heavily onto the foot of it. "She still keeping you here, Remus? Haven't escaped yet?"

Remus just smirked at Harry. "You escaped so well, Harry. I see you're back for the night like she asked."

Harry shrugged slightly. "As a nominal student here, I can't really escape forever. You, however, could just pack it in and leg it on out of here."

Remus smiled vaguely and looked over at Ginny. "I see you found the prodigal student, Ginny. Did you win your argument with Harry?"

Harry grinned while Ginny shot him a dark look. "No, he keeps saying he has to talk to the real owners of the map first."

Remus arched one eyebrow at Harry, but Harry just waved him off. "I'll talk to the two fellows, a Mr Moony and a Mr Padfoot, a bit later." Harry paused to wink at Remus while Ginny was pulling a chair over to sit in. "You're free from here as of tomorrow morning, right, Remus?"

Remus nodded cautiously. "So Poppy has indicated. Why?"

"Good. Ginny needs a complete wardrobe for training. I've got that old set of armour that's really just too small for me, so she can have that, but she needs the works otherwise – boots, tough trousers, all that." Harry shot a warning look at Ginny before she could do more than open her mouth. "Can you get that and send it to her here? Or just bring it to your lessons with her? Oh, I need a new set of armour for myself as well."

Remus shifted a bit before looking expectantly at Harry. He briefly glanced at Ginny and then rapidly returned his gaze to Harry.

What? Harry asked silently.

Well, Harry, a full wardrobe isn't terribly expensive... but are you sure you want to do this?

Harry could feel his eyebrows shooting up. Since when has money been an issue?

Remus actually managed to look mildly sheepish. Sirius and I have been managing your assets like you asked, Harry. With all the Business work going on, and the costs there... well, to put it simply, you're broke.

Really? Harry was uncertain how to feel about that news. He knew he had a place to live with his father, and he knew he would have food and clothing, so the fact that he was a bit insolvent did not bother him too much. Except for the consideration of his need for new armour, however, as that would not be cheap.

Until the next return deposits come in, yeah. That won't be until the thirtieth of September, though, when the quarter is over.

Harry frowned slightly. Damn. Now what?

Remus glanced at Ginny, who was watching the two of them with her eyes narrowed and looked about ready to either curse them or just tell them off for excluding her from the conversation. I'd offer to cover the costs, but you know I'm as broke as you are. Worse, actually. Sirius has some funds that we've been using to get by until the returns come in... I'll see if he can cover at least some of it.

Harry nodded. "All right, Remus. Boots for Ginny first, plus a couple of workout outfits, then armour for me if you can. When the funds come in at the end of the month, please get the rest."

Remus smiled slightly. "Okay. I suspect the armour will have to wait until next month, Harry. I need to get with Markus Prewitt to discuss this and –"

Ginny startled slightly and interrupted them. "Markus Prewitt?"

Harry raised an eyebrow at her.



Apparently ignoring him, Ginny rattled off a rapid-fire series of questions. "Kind of tall but heavy, unpleasant to be around, doesn't care too much for wizards, a Squib? A weird red-brown hair colour? Has a show-off know-it-all Squib daughter named Mafalda that's far too nosy?"

Remus nodded slowly.

"Huh. He's Mum's cousin, and we wondered where he'd got off to. He won't answer her letters anymore." Ginny frowned for a moment. "Can you tell me how to reach him?"

Leaning out of Ginny's sight, Harry shook his head vigorously. Remus just smirked a bit before looking back at Ginny. "You're not going to send him Howlers or something, are you?"

Ginny waved her hand airily at Remus before glaring at Harry. "No, but Mum might."

Remus grimaced slightly. "How about if we just pass along that your mum would like to exchange letters with him and take it from there? He's rather good as an accountant, you see, and I'd not like to lose his skills right now."

"Well, that's all right for now. I'll tell Mum to just ask you about it, then, shall I?" Harry started chuckling as Remus paled. "Don't worry, I'm sure she won't send you any exploding letters for at least a couple of weeks. And she saves her really good stuff for someone special to the family." Ginny's sidelong look at Harry was obvious to all of them.

Madam Pomfrey came out of her office and walked briskly up to the three of them, her shoes making a loud clicking across the hard floor. "Mr Potter, welcome back. You need your rest. Remus, Minerva has asked for you, so I need to escort you to see her. Please come with me now. Miss Weasley, you may stay for dinner or go to the Great Hall, it's your choice. The elves will ask whoever is here what they want for dinner and bring it up. We should be back shortly."

As the matron escorted Remus out the door, she leaned back into the wing and looked pointedly at Harry. “And if Cyril isn’t here by the time I get back, he’s not going to be leaving my care any time soon, Mr Potter. You might want to encourage him to return sooner rather than later.”

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A/N:

The Fidelius Charm is a bit of a dropped ball on JKR’s part. She’s set it up in canon such that it’s so ambiguous and unclear on how major parts of it work, that it’s subsequently hard to accurately say what is and isn’t feasible or how it would behave under given conditions. I have constructed a model that “fits” what is definitely known from canon books, but is unable to answer all the troublesome problems. Rather than solve them all (something I think is actually not possible), I’ve carefully boxed in how my model works to avoid inconsistencies in how it is used in this story.

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to cwarbeck and Chreechree. Thanks to Reg and random others for their aid with Brit-picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

## Chapter 20 : Inflection Points, Part 4

Cyril breezed into the infirmary while Harry was sitting with Ginny at the table in the back. Harry had been rehashing what Hermione had determined about words, thoughts, and magic but found himself highly amused that Ginny seemed to find these truths self-evident. It was less than amusing to her, however, when she was unable to manage the light spell without words.

Harry had dissuaded her from trying to switch the words to something meaningless yet, telling her it would be much simpler if she learned to do it silently first. She had managed to set the table on fire once and later to coat Madam Pomfrey's door in bubbles, which was impressive in and of itself, but she was determined to get the light spell working before Hermione did.

"Cyril." Harry nodded as his Mentor came in. "Madam Pomfrey was threatening you with an extended visit and some special treatment if you didn't return soon." Ginny ignored them beyond a quick 'hello' to Cyril, focusing on her magic and the wand in her hand.

Cyril raised an equally amused eyebrow before dropping down next to Harry. "I have sent a note to Professor McGonagall, asking her to let us know when she has some spare time available. We both need to speak with her at some length tonight."

Harry was curious to know why but chose not to ask yet. It was clear that Cyril had no desire to discuss it more than once, so he just let it go for the moment. "I need to get back to my room. I want to give Ginny the first volume of The Theory of Magic. Do you mind?"

Cyril's amused expression, if anything, became more pronounced. "I'll let Poppy know."

Harry gave up guessing what his Mentor was up to and rose quickly, tapping Ginny on the shoulder to get her attention. As she stood to follow him, Harry called back over his shoulder. "If the house-elves show up, I'll be having dinner here. Ginny said she'd be eating with the rest of the school."

Cyril nodded acknowledgement but turned to a book he withdrew from his robes. Harry was curious to know what it was about, but just glancing at the title revealed that it was written in a language with which he was unfamiliar. Shrugging, Harry led Ginny out of the infirmary and off toward Gryffindor Tower.

“Does this mean I get to know where your room is?” Ginny’s voice carried a hint of humour, even though she was still flicking her wand repeatedly, trying to make it light up.

Harry chuckled audibly. “Sure, you can even watch me go in.” He knew that she would be really challenged by the disappearing trick that the Fidelius conveyed to people that lacked knowledge of the secret, but this could be a new form of entertainment. Given her statement that she had the twins and Hermione helping her look, he wondered if they might find some way of bypassing the charm through sheer stubbornness.

Harry had to pause for a moment as a goose popped out of Ginny’s wand, waddled three steps in front of them, and disappeared in a puff of feathers. As soon as the feathers hit the floor, they vanished. Harry was unable to resist the temptation. “Hey, Ginny, can you teach me that one?”

Ginny frowned at him but kept working.

When they arrived outside the door to the Gryffindor common room and stopped, Ginny looked around in apparent surprise. “Er, Harry, I thought we were going to your room.”

Harry smirked. “We aren’t, but I am. Watch!” Harry casually entered through the portrait in front of the suite of rooms he shared with Cyril, whispering the password as quietly as he could manage. Harry started laughing as he heard her muffled expletives when he vanished through the painting. Finding *The Theory of Magic, Volume I: Core Understanding*, Harry picked up the thick tome and carried it back into the corridor.

Ginny jumped slightly when he rematerialised directly in front of her. “So now you know where my room is, right?” His face ached from the

massive smirk, but the narrowed eyes and assorted tics indicative of a mild temper from the redhead were ample compensation for his slight discomfort. Casually extending the thick text toward her, he waited until she grasped it with one hand before pulling his wand out.

Ginny visibly froze in place when he pointed the wand at her. "Right, I'm going to charm this so only you and I know what it is. If anyone else looks at it, it will just look like a book that they abhor the idea of even opening, let alone reading. I'll also put on a weak repellent to discourage people from asking about it. Hold still." Ginny flinched when he cast the spells, but the book only glowed for a moment.

"Read that. Try to get through the first chapter by tomorrow." Harry paused to run his hand through his hair again, while Ginny gawked at the size of the book in her hands. "What else, what else. Oh, if you find any spelling or grammatical mistakes, tell Remus. He's the editor, and he should have picked them up. And, no, you're not allowed to talk about anything you learn from that book. So no academic chats with Hermione, alright? What else . . . Hmmm."

As Harry stood there thinking and Ginny was slowly thumbing through the book, a voice called out from the opening into Gryffindor Tower. "Harry!" Neville smiled at him and stepped out fully. "I thought I heard someone out here." He looked at Ginny briefly before glancing at the book in her hands. When he saw the title, he flushed slightly and took a step back. "Er, hi, Ginny."

Ginny glanced at Neville and saw how his eyes were locked on the book in her hands. Shooting Harry a wry look, she turned back to Neville. "Hello, Neville. Weren't you going to spend some time helping Ron with Herbology this afternoon?"

Neville finally tore his eyes away from the book, and Harry was suddenly very curious to know what book Neville was so terrified of reading. Based on his expressions, he was certain it had to be something he himself would find rather interesting.

"Er, yes, we had planned to. He's late. That's why I was looking in the corridor when I heard voices." Neville breathed a sigh of obvious

relief when Ginny put the book behind her back. “Er, you haven’t seen him, have you, Ginny?”

Ginny gave him a smile but shook her head. Harry knew his wolf-smile, as Neville dubbed it, had emerged while regarding the pair of them. “Well, Ginny, I do need to be off to the infirmary before Madam Pomfrey has my head. Since you’re so eager to read that book, why don’t you keep Neville company while he waits?”

Harry moved swiftly away and laughed quietly to himself all the way back to the hospital wing as he replayed Neville’s stuttering exclamations of how he was just fine waiting by himself, and no, Ginny really did not need to keep him company. Pausing to reflect on the current state of his games in progress, Harry felt that he was pleasantly ahead in the contest with Ginny, somewhat ahead of the twins, and held a slight lead over the sneaky, yet under-rated, Mrs Weasley.

As he entered the infirmary, a house-elf was busy setting out two trays of dinner while Cyril was writing on a sheet of parchment. When Cyril looked up to see Harry, he just waved him over to the table and went back to writing. As Harry sat down, Cyril spoke while continuing to write.

“Minerva has asked us to wait for her in the Headmaster’s Office as soon as we finish supper. She also has news to share with us and will be along as quickly as she is able.” Harry ate his dinner in silence as Cyril wrapped up his writing and consumed his own meal. Feeling that the silence was a precursor to something ominous, Harry found himself somewhat anxious to start the meeting with McGonagall and had no difficulty rapidly devouring the early dinner.

After they both had eaten their fill, Cyril tacked the parchment to Madam Pomfrey’s door, and they quickly left for the meeting. When the staircases refused to align properly, leaving them at the base of the first staircase to the main corridors of the castle, Harry wished fervently that he knew how Crowley controlled the staircases. That was yet another question to ask Remus, and he mentally added it to the list he maintained when he had a moment to sit and reflect on his many issues and questions.

Harry paused as he and Cyril stood waiting on the staircases in the entrance hallway of the castle. The school dinner would be starting in another ten or fifteen minutes, so there would soon be students streaming toward them. Glancing around, he noted absently that the Great Hall doors were closed, but the main entrance doors were open. Harry could discern that someone was moving just outside of his vision, a rippling shadow across the threshold in the rapidly fading daylight. The back-and-forth movement was unusual, as it suggested impatient waiting rather than someone out just to enjoy the evening or otherwise engaged in normal activities. Harry unconsciously took a half-dozen steps toward the doors but failed to see whoever was outside.

Cyril moved to stand beside Harry, regarding the front doors as Harry did, but said nothing. Faintly, they could hear some voices calling from outside, although the words were unintelligible.

As Harry and Cyril stood and faced the doors, five men walked into the entrance hall. Leading the group were the unmistakable forms of Lucius and Draco Malfoy, with the caretaker Filch shambling along just behind them, and two Aurors bringing up the rear by a few paces. Cyril immediately moved in front of Harry, blocking a direct view from any of them.

The new arrivals stopped cold when they saw Cyril standing there. Lucius looked as though he wanted to strike Cyril dead but managed to adopt a condescending look of casual superiority as he noted Harry just behind the old War Mage.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Master Feiner and his young puppy.” Lucius paused for a moment. “If you would step aside, we have business here.”

Cyril made no effort to move but continued to regard them before breaking his silence. “That is most interesting. I understood that the younger Master Malfoy was banned from this institution.”

Something intangible flashed across Lucius’ eyes for a moment before he settled into his usual sneer. “The Wizengamot has found

Draco innocent of all charges, and I have a decree from the Board of Governors and the Wizengamot reinstating him as a student here. I am here to see him properly returned to the rolls and to secure pledges for his continued safety.”

Harry knew his eyebrows were climbing toward his hairline, but he was curious just how well informed the Malfoys were with regards to the changes that had transpired during Draco’s absence. Cyril took two steps forward, hand extended in silent demand for evidence of such a decree, and inadvertently revealed Harry fully to the others.

The pair of Aurors at the back jerked slightly at seeing Harry and rushed forward, wands drawn, to take a protective stance between Harry and the Malfoys. As soon as the two men began moving, Harry and Cyril both had their respective wands out and reflexively moved in random patterns to present difficult targets.

The Aurors did not have their wands aimed specifically at Harry but rather in his general direction, while he kept shifting back and forth among them at random to avoid being predictable. Harry found it odd that they were clearly prepared to die defending the Malfoys from Harry when he had done nothing to warrant their reaction, and Cyril had a much more capable reputation than Harry did.

When Cyril apparently realised that both Aurors were ignoring him in favour of exclusively focusing on Harry, he moved back in front of Harry. As soon as Cyril stepped in front of Harry and gestured for him to become still, Harry glanced around his Mentor to see the Aurors slowly lowering the wands while keeping a wary eye on Cyril. Harry was baffled at this unusual behaviour.

Cyril, seeming to be of the same mind, extended his left hand while keeping his wand loosely held in the right. “The decrees you mentioned, Mr Malfoy?”

Eyes flashing, Lucius handed two rolls of parchment to one Auror, who promptly drew a bead on Cyril with his wand. The Auror’s wand never deviated as he slowly approached and held out the parchments. After Cyril took a brief second to glance at the seals, he handed them



back. Making quite a show of stowing his wand, Cyril motioned for Harry to likewise put away his own wands.

With the pair of them having moved to a non-threatening stance, Harry was surprised to see the Aurors did not likewise stow their wands away. Rather, they held them loosely in their grasp, the tips aimed at the floor. It was a stance he knew from years of duelling, a stance that meant they were prepared for instant action.

“Very well, Mr Malfoy. I will escort you to either the Head of Slytherin House or the Deputy Headmistress. Which would you prefer?” Cyril’s tone was casual, but Harry could hear the overtones of warning in it.

Draco ground his teeth together audibly while glowering at Harry. Lucius laid a restraining hand on his son’s arm, never taking his eyes from Cyril. “I will see the Headmaster, not some... weak-willed proxy.”

“Ah,” Cyril said with a hint of amusement. “For medical reasons, that is unfortunately not possible. Therefore, will you see your son’s Head of House, or the Deputy Headmistress? There are no other choices.”

Lucius clearly put more effort into restraining his son while his other hand, holding his walking cane, twitched ever so slightly. “Very well. I will talk to McGonagall... for now.”

As Cyril nodded and turned, he made a vague gesture for Harry to go elsewhere while his Mentor dealt with the unfolding situation. Harry stood by the side of the hallway as the group began moving toward the staircases, all of them casting looks his way. It was amusing to note the open hostility, nervousness, and anger on the faces. And that was what struck him the most. There was not one friendly face amongst the five of them.

Something clicked in the back of his mind.

Filch was scowling at him, hands thrust in robe pockets, looking for all the world like he wanted to take Harry someplace quiet and torture him into insanity for hours, if not weeks. The expression was so

foreign compared to how Filch had been treating him just two nights ago that it took him a moment to realise that Filch looked different. In fact, it was quite appalling just how different he looked.

“Mentor Feiner, I just remembered, Nicolas left a message for you earlier while you were out.” Harry’s mind was racing, trusting Cyril to listen to what he was saying mentally rather than verbally. That is not Filch!

“Oh?” Cyril’s paused and regarded Harry politely, turning so that he was facing the five arrivals as well as his Apprentice. How do you know?

“He left a package for you. He said it requires some special handling and that you would know what to do about opening it safely.” Harry was becoming acutely aware that the three people in front of them could actually be anyone at all, and that left the same question about the two Aurors that had been acting so skittishly. The Filch I’ve been doing detention with is a Squib with hardly any aura. That man is a full wizard, and his aura shows it.

“Why don’t you run and get it, while I escort these gentlemen to see the Deputy Headmistress?” Cyril’s tone shifted not a whit, although Harry could discern the focus of power on the man’s hands. Little sparks were starting to radiate to Harry’s vision, a sure sign of hidden stress. We are at a disadvantage. I dare not let them out of my sight if they are false, so I will play along. We need more wands. Do we know where any of the faculty are?

Harry feigned surprise. “Now, sir?” Not a clue.

Cyril nodded his head patiently. “Now, please, Apprentice.” You will not follow us, but run ahead. Use the blind nook just before the corridor to the gargoyle. You target our Mr Filch, then Draco, then the tall Auror. I’ll take Lucius, the shorter Auror with glasses, and then support you as needed. Stun only unless otherwise necessary. You must avoid student injury unless everything goes sour.

“Yes, sir. I’ll meet you back outside the Headmaster’s office when you’re finished.” Harry quickly broke into a light jog, his back itching with the latent feeling as though someone wanted to kill him. His brisk pace rapidly left the people in the entrance hall behind. As he loped up the stairs and through the corridors, the feeling of malice disappeared. The few early students heading for dinner startled and flattened themselves against the walls as he passed. Most had expressions of fear on their face as he went by, but Harry had no time to care about such trivialities at the moment.

As he reached the corridor that had the nook to hide in, he glanced around the bend and saw a few students, including the Weasley twins, loitering in the corridor. Not wanting to take the time to explain anything, he focused his thoughts tightly on where they were standing. Fred! George! Get the hell—”

Both of the Weasley twins started glowing blue, and Harry’s frustration level immediately went up a notch. “RAPE! MIND RAPE!” Fred dropped whatever he had been holding, and it started rapidly scuttling across the floor while George jumped nearly a foot in the air before spinning around.

– out of here! Clear the —

Those Occlumency Shield rings were clearly a double-edged sword. “SOMEONE IS RAPING—”

– corridor and don’t let anyone —

Wincing at the volume and hoping that there was sufficient distance that the sound would not carry back to the advancing Malfoy party, Harry was resigned that his own pet project wares were screaming at him. “—MY MIND! BUGGER—”

– down this way! Get back toward —

“—OFF! YOU’VE NO—”

– the tower! Move!

“–RIGHT!”

Fred was scrambling to catch something with far too many legs for comfort, and the other students were scampering out of its path. As George started to open his mouth, clearly intent on arguing or having some kind of discussion, Harry focused again. Shut up and move if you want to live!

Thankfully, the second burst of Legilimency was short enough to slide under the ring's window for activating either the glowing effect or the screams of protest.

Fred and George started hustling the others abruptly down the hallway and back toward Gryffindor Tower amidst a chorus of questions and complaints, while Harry Disillusioned himself and moved back into the nook.

Cyril and the others would never have a clear line of sight into the tight spot as they approached him, but Harry would have a perfect view of their backs as they rounded the corner and approached the Headmaster's office. The crazy old castle architecture typically had little spots like this where passages intersected at odd angles.

After another few minutes, Harry could hear the tread of feet coming down the corridor and loosely held both wands at the ready. Aurors were trained to react quickly, and even though he would be silently casting, Harry knew at least one of them would probably manage to cast a spell.

As they came abreast of Harry's hiding spot, Harry spied Lucius and the fake Filch in the lead, Draco right behind them, and the two Aurors trailing with Cyril immediately behind the Aurors, much to Harry's surprise. Somehow, his Mentor had managed to get in the rear of the party. Just as they were starting to move down the hallway, the Auror with glasses glanced at the nook Harry was hiding in and his face went pale at the same instant as his hand flicked his wand up, and he started shouting frantically.

Harry's silent Stupefy! dropped him before he could more than partially whine, but the entire motion had been sufficient to draw the attention of the others. Harry knew his Disillusionment charm would be shimmering since he was moving too quickly for it to compensate. The second Auror was moving between Draco and Harry just as Cyril dropped him.

Since the plan was already shot to hell, Harry fired a well aimed Stupefy! at Draco, who was diving to one side, and a wild off-hand Stupefy! at Filch, who was dropping to the floor as though the attack was expected.

Lucius apparently cast something at Cyril, clearly prepared for an attack while at the school. Cyril's Stunner impacted on Lucius but was deflected by a Shield Spell, answering the question of Lucius' first spell. Draco was hit mid-dive and fell unconscious to the ground, while Filch was reaching for a wand on his left arm.

As Harry moved in a diving roll out of the possible trap the nook could become, Lucius' wand flared brightly and a wide swath of purple shot toward him. It all but destroyed an arc of blocks in the wall, leaving a few random holes opening into an empty classroom and several hallway paintings screeching.

While Cyril's second attack was another Stunner aimed at Lucius, Harry came out of his roll in a tangent to Filch's orientation. The fake caretaker was in mid-cast when Harry launched a Stunner with his right wand followed a split-second later by a boosted shield from his left.

Lucius lashed out at Cyril with his walking cane as he twisted sideways, letting Cyril's Stunner shoot past and leave a scorch mark across the wall. Vague shouts could be heard from the far end of the corridor where the students were presumably clustered, but they were of no import.

Cyril moved closer to Lucius, flicking his wand in a sharp downward motion to immobilise the arm with the walking cane. Harry's shield glowed brightly before dissolving as the curse from Filch burned it off, his own Stunner missing the caretaker by a hair and hitting the

gargoyle near the Headmaster's office, turning its face black. As Filch rolled lengthwise to the left, he shot off another curse, causing Harry to jump into another sideways roll to avoid it.

Sirius' voice popped in Harry's head, an echo of their conversation by the lake, the idea that you should have done one of your charm tricks in battle. He knew that the longer the battle continued, the greater the chance of serious injury or death. It was evident that both of their opponents were adept with non-verbal magic.

The split-second of reflection cost him as Cyril went down to a vibrant purple curse from Lucius, and Filch scrambled to his feet beside the Death Eater. Now it was two-on-one, and Cyril had ordered him to avoid anything beyond a simple Stunner if at all possible. Harry knew the other two would start reviving Draco and the Aurors if he gave them half a chance, so Cyril's instructions were no longer viable.

Harry rose out of his sideways roll into a slanting run, firing off twin Bubble-Head Charms at the same time since neither required any particularly good aim, nor would a shield stop either from activating. Both of his opponents were in the middle of casting something he was certain would make everything more unpleasant when the shimmering dome appeared in the corridor, enclosing both men and quite a bit of empty space. The two charms were so close together they looked like just a single sphere.

With a snapping and twisting wrist motion from both hands, Harry collapsed both bubbles to just barely the size of the two men inside, crushing the interior to somewhat less than one-third of their original volume. Lucius managed to get his curse off right as the dome began collapsing, which shattered the first bubble, but the second bubble held. Inside the sphere, within fractions of a second of it shrinking, both men clearly began screaming and dropped toward the ground, their arms moving to wrap around their heads. Harry was thankful the bubblehead prevented their sounds from actually being heard beyond a faint buzzing around the dome. Instead of hitting the floor as they fell in agony, both men were lying along the bottom curve of the bubble, firmly trapped inside as they thrashed about.

By the time the reduced sphere had been in place almost one second, Harry released the charm and let it dissipate. The wails of agony from the two men now lying on the corridor floor were nearly inhuman in volume. Having previously been the recipient of a high-pressure shock to his own eardrums, Harry knew the sudden increase to almost ten times standard atmospheric-pressure on their bodies was more than enough to render them temporarily non-threatening. The pressure waves from the forced reduction of the sphere and subsequent release caused discomfort to Harry's own ears, but the greater volume of air in the corridor could absorb the rapid displacements.

His old standby, the Bubble-Head Charm, had proven its worth once again. Harry knew that if he had kept the high pressure for even a second longer, the release of the charm would have been fatal to the prostrate men as their lungs would have shredded under rapid expansion and their blood filled with nitrogen bubbles. As it was, they were utterly debilitated but probably had sustained no permanent damage from the event. Their joints, however, might ache for a while.

Harry Stunned both of them in rapid succession and paused to survey the suddenly silent scene, his heart thumping heavily with the adrenaline still flowing like mad. With a deep sigh, Harry wiped the sweat from his brow as he looked around.

The wall behind him would need repairs and the gargoyle some cleaning, but on the whole it could have been a lot worse. Draco was unconscious. Trace amounts of blood leaked out the ears, noses, and eyes of Lucius and Filch, and obvious bruises were beginning to form under their skin. The Stunned Aurors were otherwise unharmed, but Cyril needed immediate medical aid.

Dropping to his feet beside his Mentor, Harry released his Disillusionment charm and checked for a pulse. It was erratic, and his breathing was laboured, but Cyril was still alive. Madam Pomfrey would probably give both of them a stern talking to, but she would need to treat not only Cyril but also Lucius and the fake Filch before that could happen.

The sound of running feet from the stairwell behind him led him to stand in front of Cyril, both wands drawn and aimed down the corridor. Harry noted absently that his hands had a slight tremor as the adrenaline was beginning to wear off. As a preventative measure, Harry flicked two giant shields into place, one in front of him and one between Cyril and the five downed opponents.

When McGonagall came around the corner in a dead run, followed closely by Flitwick, Sprout, and Vector, Harry sighed and released the shields. Seeing the bodies all over the corridor, Harry was certain the faculty would have flashbacks to a week ago when there were other bodies all over the same corridor, and he knew this would be a tight story to get out before McGonagall could pierce him with some magic. At least this time there was minimal blood on the ground.

Sliding his wands back into his holsters, he tried his best to ignore the expressions of the recent arrivals. "We need Madam Pomfrey, immediately!" Harry managed to keep his voice relatively calm but was having a hard time controlling the volume. McGonagall stood still for a moment before firing a silvery amorphous spell that disappeared through one wall, while the other three began checking on the downed wizards.

"Potter! Explain! Now!" McGonagall's voice was like ice, and her facial expression was something he had seen only hours ago as she swept into the infirmary to confront Fudge and his associates. At that time, she had been clearly disapproving, and Harry had been tickled to see hardened Aurors flinch at her gaze.

Finding himself on the other side of the coin, Harry found he too was unable to avoid flinching at the woman's piercing gaze. As quickly as he could, he sketched out how the Aurors were acting odd, the reason why Lucius and Draco were there, and then coupled it all to the sudden realisation that the man on the ground was not Argus Filch. Harry then recounted Cyril's instructions, given their lack of available support. He briefly explained their complete lack of faith that any of these people were who they claimed to be, and concluded that they probably needed to send for a squad of known Aurors to investigate.



After hearing the explanation, Flitwick was busy casting a series of charms on each body. "This is neither Draco Malfoy nor Argus Filch. Both of these people are Polyjuiced. The others are not under any glamour or Polyjuice Potion, nor are they Metamorphmagi. I checked for human Transfiguration, but that failed as well. There may be other means of falsification, but I'm unaware of them."

McGonagall nodded her acceptance and regarded the two identified as under Polyjuice for a moment. After a long minute of scrutiny, Harry watched her cast another silvery shape from her wand which rapidly disappeared through a different wall. McGonagall then seemed content to stand with the other faculty and Harry waiting for the mediwitch to arrive.

Harry stood next to her, staring at Filch and wondering who it could be. The man's left arm was out to one side, the hand open and empty. The right arm was by his hip, the gloved hand open and mere inches from the wand he had been using.

"Professor?" Harry was unsure if she would be willing to talk with him at the moment.

"Yes, Mr Potter?"

"I feel a bit uncomfortable asking this, but I'm trying to remember something the Headmaster said to me last week in St. Mungo's. He said that one of his staff members tried to pick up my sword and lost their hand in doing so."

The entire faculty was suddenly staring at Harry closely. McGonagall was looking paler than she had been seconds ago. "Yes, you are correct in your memory. It was Mr Filch. Go on."

"So why hasn't he been out for my blood during detentions?"

McGonagall sighed slightly. "The Headmaster placed a very weak Confundus charm on Mr Filch so he would not be able to remember the students involved in the event, even if he was later informed of whom they were. You may not repeat this, Mr Potter."

“All right.” Harry paused before thinking of how to phrase what he really wanted to ask. “The real question, Professor, is why, when I’ve spent all that time with him, he’s had both his hands... I haven’t seen a prosthetic or scars or anything during my detentions. It never occurred to me, since so many other things have happened since then.”

Silence was the only answer. Finally, McGonagall stirred slightly before kneeling and pulling the glove back from the false Filch’s right hand. Flesh with no scars was revealed. “An excellent question, Mr Potter. I fear this is more complicated than any of us appreciate.”

As she stood up, the faculty members were now shifting somewhat nervously from foot to foot. Harry could feel the frequent glances his way, and he became increasingly uncomfortable just standing there.

Reflecting again on how it all happened rather quickly, Harry realised that he needed to pay closer attention to whom he used Legilimency with, and that he would have to talk to Remus about Ginny’s training. The growing laundry list of discussion items was becoming too large to keep track of, making Harry think about carrying a pen and paper on him at all times just to write the questions down.

“Er, Professor McGonagall,” Harry said quietly. “Just so you know, I told Fred and George Weasley to block anyone from coming this way. Someone ought to let them know when they can get out of the tower corridor safely again and go to dinner.”

“Hmm.” McGonagall was quiet for a moment, as they all heard another set of running footsteps. “Five points to Gryffindor, Mr Potter. You did at least one thing right. I will later decide how many to remove for what you did not do right.”

Madam Pomfrey came flying down the hall as though propelled, and Harry was sad to see her face pale dramatically as she rushed toward the people on the ground. As soon as Harry pointed to Cyril, she altered her course slightly and dropped to her knees beside him.

Quickly casting a few diagnostic spells, she looked up unhappily. "Do you know what he was hit with?"

Harry shook his head. "Something vividly bright and luridly purple."

The mediwitch clucked under her tongue for a moment before turning to McGonagall. "He must go to St Mungo's. He needs immediate treatment." McGonagall nodded slightly, at which point Madam Pomfrey pulled out a chain of blank keys from her pocket. Snapping one off, she put on top of Cyril's chest and tapped it with her wand, causing him to disappear with a soft pop!

She then moved over to the others. A quick set of diagnostic spells led her to the bodies of Filch and Lucius, where she spent some time using her wand. As she was finishing what healing she could effect, a collection of running feet could be heard coming down the hallway.

The unmistakable form of Kingsley Shacklebolt came around the corner, closely followed by six other Aurors all in a flat-out run. Each one had a sheen of sweat on their faces, but their breathing was steady, indicating they were all in rather good condition physically.

As Kingsley came to a halt in front of McGonagall, the other Aurors fanned out and collected every wand they could find from the bodies, searching each one for additional weapons or wands. One of them even took Lucius' walking cane and placed it to the side with the other objects gathered.

"All right, what's going on?" Harry was once again amused to hear the towering black man talking in a voice that just sounded odd. It was lighter than his frame would suggest it might be and had an odd, almost rhythmic, quality to it.

At McGonagall's gesture to explain, Harry gave a quick accounting of what transpired since he and Cyril had noticed the odd behaviour of someone outside the doors. When he finished describing everything, Kingsley just nodded briefly. "Right. Madam Pomfrey, are any of these in need of urgent medical care?"

The mediwitch shook her head. "No. But these two," she said with a gesture toward Lucius and Filch, "need to see someone soon. There will be scarring of their ear drums if they aren't treated within a couple of hours. They do need a bit more work, but are stable for now. I have already sent Cyril Feiner to St Mungo's directly by emergency Portkey."

Apparently making a snap decision, Kingsley motioned over two of the Aurors. "Right, you two, gather up all the evidence. We'll sort this out back at the office. Let's just take this lot down to the cells." Kingsley paused to conjure a length of rope and to direct it to securely bind the five bodies. "One of you pick up the duty Healer when we get back."

Kingsley looked over and pointed at another two. "You two, sweep the castle. Find out what you can. You're looking for Filch and that lovely cat of his." Looking at the last pair, Kingsley shot them a wry smile. "You two get the fun part. Debrief the faculty here, Madam Pomfrey, the paintings, and Mr Potter. Then pop over to St Mungo's and get Master Feiner's statement. Clear?"

Kingsley paused for any questions, of which there were none. With that, Kingsley raised an eyebrow at McGonagall who tapped the conjured rope with her wand, clearly saying, "Portus!" Within a few seconds, the two Aurors tagged to follow him gathered up all the evidence and each took a firm grip on the conjured rope. Kingsley gave a quick nod of thanks to McGonagall, and then the eight of them disappeared with a loud crack! when he tapped the rope with his wand.

The two Aurors assigned for search duty exchanged a look before turning to McGonagall. "We'll start in the dungeons and work our way up. If we run into a locked door or something we can't get past, we'll have a painting catch you up."

As the two of them headed back the way they came, Madam Pomfrey came over and scanned Harry for a moment with her wand, casting a series of diagnostic charms Harry was becoming all too familiar with. "Well, Mr Potter, I see you've got some minor bruising but are

otherwise unharmed. Return to the infirmary, please. I'll tell the Aurors they can find you there."

Harry leaned around to look at the Aurors, wanting to say something, but the one nearest him just waved him off. "We'll find you, no worries." The woman had a voice he recognised, but he opted not to say anything presently and instead simply followed instructions.

Harry turned to leave when McGonagall's voice called out behind him. "Mr Potter, before you go, please inform the people of Gryffindor Tower that it's now safe to leave for dinner, if you will."

Smiling slightly, Harry trudged up the corridor and headed back toward the tower. When he rounded the second corridor away from the Headmaster's door, however, he was torn between disapproval and humour at what he saw. The Weasley twins were standing with their wands drawn, apparently threatening bodily harm on the various students sitting on the floor, waiting to find out what was going on and why they were held from dinner. Ginny was pacing back and forth just behind them, facing toward Harry, that first volume of Remus' work in her hands.

When she saw him come around the corner, Harry found himself facing a woman that appeared to be one step away from full-on anger. "Harry!" Her voice was relatively quiet, but laced with irritation. "What the bloody hell is going on?!"

"Oh, the usual. You're all free to go on to dinner now. The trouble's over." Harry strived for a calm and casual voice calculated to infuriate her and amuse the twins. As most of the Gryffindors got to their feet and tromped past, shooting suspicious looks at Harry, the twins and Ginny came over to stand near him. Harry found himself facing three identical looks, something he would loosely translate as "talk-or-else," as the last of the Gryffindors streamed past. Harry noticed in passing that neither Ron nor Hermione were in the crowd.

"Hey, it's me, right? What's my average day?" Harry paused to let them reflect on the question. "A few Polyjuiced Death Eaters, a pair of

possessed Aurors, nasty lethal spells, broken walls, upset gargoyles... you know, the usual.”

All three were looking at him with disbelief before Fred just shook his head. “If this is your idea of average, Harry, remind me not to be around when you feel the need to do something exciting.”

Harry caught a wink from George behind Ginny’s back. “Right, so has all the blood been cleaned up yet?” George’s voice was loud and boisterous, but Ginny went slightly pale at his words.

Harry shrugged impassively. “By the time you get there, yeah, it should be. I’m just letting you know it’s safe to go to dinner, find a companion and a broom cupboard, whatever tickles your fancy. Cheers!”

Harry nonchalantly turned away and started to walk back to the infirmary, chuckling as he knew just how irritating that had to be for Ginny. She really seemed to dislike not knowing what was going on, and since her personality was reverting back to what it had been before everything went to hell, it was fun to irritate her again. Floppy said happiness had nothing to do with tormenting others, but what did that silly Hat know?

Ginny caught up to Harry before he made it to the Headmaster’s staircase. “You’re being serious, aren’t you?”

Harry shot her a look of tolerance. “Absolutely.”

Ginny just shook her head as she fell into step with him. “Including that this is normal?”

The small laugh that came out was unavoidable. “Well, no, not really. It seems these things just happen. Today wasn’t too bad. You should have been there yesterday. That was rough.”

“Yesterday?”

Harry was surprised by the question. Staring at her for a moment, he thought that the simplest thing was to forcibly remind her. "The reason we're all in the infirmary? Yesterday? Hello?"

Ginny sighed and put her head down, walking in silence beside Harry. As they came to the spot where the two Aurors were talking to the faculty, Madam Pomfrey shot him an imperious look with her finger pointing to the infirmary section of the castle. Nodding with a slight smile, Harry just kept trudging along, wondering what Ginny really wanted. Her gaze remained on the broken wall as they passed the others in silence.

As they crossed through to the entrance hall, Harry paused for a moment. "Aren't you going to dinner?"

Ginny looked up and seemed surprised they were already near the Great Hall. Shaking her head, she nudged Harry on toward the stairs for the infirmary as she walked along with him, the thick book held to her chest. "I'll just ask Madam Pomfrey to call a house-elf, or maybe I'll nick something from the kitchens later."

Harry remained silent as they waited for the stairs to line up properly. "You know, I really hate not having my broom while trying to get around this stupid castle."

Ginny smiled. "Rumour has it that all the Quidditch teams are going to start using your method tomorrow. I imagine it won't be long before flying is simply banned inside the castle."

As the stairs finally began to align properly, Harry sighed dramatically. "That's a pity. Indoors Quidditch would be a lot of fun. You could use a bookbag for a Quaffle, and a classroom door for goals."

Ginny started laughing. "Imagine the places that a Snitch could hide. That would be fun." As Harry and Ginny reached the corridor to the hospital wing, a voice called out behind them, making the pair stop.

"Harry!" The lead Auror collecting statements came bounding up the staircase three steps at a time, racing toward the pair standing just past the top of the staircase. Right as the Auror made it to the top of

the steps, her right foot caught on the top one, and she went down in a rolling pile of limbs and bowled over Harry as Ginny hastily jumped to the side.

“Ugh! Tonks!” Harry shoved her off of him. “Was that strictly necessary?”

Tonks just staggered back to her feet and grinned wickedly. “Aww, Harry, you know how much I miss you being under me!”

Rolling his eyes at her, Harry looked over her shoulder at the other Auror now reaching the top of the stairs in a rather more sedate and controlled manner. Tonks, looking back over her shoulder and still grinning like a fool, apparently noticed the object of his scrutiny and waved her partner over.

“Harry, meet Christine Pasteur. She’s the partner that got stuck with me after the reshuffle this past summer.” Tonks grimaced at Harry as he raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, I know, you’ve been asking me to drop by, but it’s just been one thing after another. Moody being recalled didn’t help at all.”

Harry held out his hand and was pleased when the tall woman shook it firmly without a hint of hesitation. She was cut of the same mould as Sirius, tall with striking shoulder-length dark hair, but she had vivid blue eyes. As an Auror, she was required to be in shape, yet during their brief handshake her lithe arm conveyed that she worked hard to keep not only in shape, but physically strong. “Nice to meet you, Auror Pasteur.” He kept his voice calm and neutral, unsure of how trusted she was in Tonks’ opinion.

“Likewise, Mr Potter.”

Tonks shot her two hands out and grabbed both of their clasped hands, exaggeratedly moving them in a caricature of a business deal. “Harry, Christine, Christine, Harry. Relax with each other. Oh, and neither of you likes nicknames.”



Harry and Christine shot each other an amused look before they pulled back from Tonks. As Harry motioned to Ginny with one hand, he wondered how much he trusted talking to Tonks in front of Ginny, let alone the unknown Christine. “Ginny, meet Tonks, and her partner, Christine. Ladies, Ginny Weasley. She’s sort of... eh, studying with me, I guess.”

Tonks looked Ginny up and down in such an aggressive manner that it made the redhead blush slightly. “And what exactly are you studying with my Harry?” Harry was amused at the clear challenge in Tonks’ voice, but let it slide. He was reasonably certain that Ginny could hold her own in this situation.

Ginny’s eyes narrowed slightly as her flush darkened, indicating that her embarrassment was rapidly turning into irritation. “Well, your Harry has been trying to assure me he knows how to treat a lady. Personally, I think he’s in dire need of remedial lessons before I could possibly accept him.”

Tonks glowered back for a moment before she lost it and started laughing. “You’ll do just fine, Ginny.” Shaking her head, she pushed Harry in front of her and waved him onward as the four finished the remainder of the trip to Madam Pomfrey’s domain.

Tonks lagged behind to walk with Ginny, clearly ignoring Harry’s gesture for Tonks to walk beside him. Harry was curious to know what had kept Tonks from visiting for the past couple of months. Christine stepped up to walk beside him, a look of faint amusement on her face, but she seemed content to remain silent.

Tonks, however, felt no such compulsions. “Remedial lessons. Ha! Ginny, you don’t know the half of it. Harry’s had, what, two dates, both of which were complete disasters.” Tonks started giggling like mad for a moment. “He came back from the second one covered in fizzy drink, this sticky Muggle thing, looking like he tried to swim in a soup pot!”

Harry glanced back to see a bewildered expression on Ginny’s face. Harry was unable to stop the irritation from lacing his words. “Tonks! Would you like me to tell embarrassing stories about you?!”

Tonks kept giggling but shot a challenging look at Harry. "Do your worst. Just remember, I know all about your sordid past."

Harry frowned. He knew Tonks, and there was no way she was going to pass up a new opportunity to embarrass him. Privately, he suspected that she had landed herself in so many mortifying moments through her clumsiness and Metamorphing skills that she had become completely immune to humiliation. He only knew one way to get past her mental armour, and even then all he could get was colour-changing hair or the like. Doing his best to ignore the sudden stereo giggles and whispered conversation behind him, Harry led the quartet up to the infirmary. As he pulled open the door, though, he thought he could see a look of commiseration on Christine's face as she followed him into the room.

"Remus!" Tonks left a very flushed Ginny standing in the doorway as she ran into the room and promptly attached herself to the werewolf's face in a rather loud and quite messy kiss. It was clear that the feelings were reciprocated when Remus bodily dragged her on to the bed, obviously holding her tight during the reunion.

"Tonks, you're going to force Madam Pomfrey to keep him here longer if you don't let him breathe soon," Harry called out to her as Christine and Ginny gathered somewhat awkwardly at the foot of Remus' bed. Harry dropped down into the chair between Remus' bed and his own, amused at the antics of the Auror.

Breaking off the exuberant kiss with nary a hint of embarrassment, Tonks grasped Remus' hand firmly and situated herself more comfortably next to him on the bed, snuggling into his side. "That's why you have a nose, Harry, to keep breathing when your mouth is busy trying to tell someone you missed them."

Harry raised one eyebrow in disbelief. "Oh? I don't seem to recall you needing your nose when you told me that just now. All you needed were your hands all over my bum while you were on top of me shouting my name."

Remus looked momentarily surprised before he settled into a grin. "She tripped and landed on top of you again, did she now?"

Harry just waved the question off. "One of these days, I'm going to shock the pair of you, and then I'll make pictures. Just you wait."

Tonks adopted a sly look as she closed her eyes. "Sure, Harry, sure. You keep saying that, but it's been two years now. Face it. You're too predictable."

Drumming his fingers on the armrest, Harry glared at Remus since Tonks was keeping her eyes closed. "So aside from missing your beau, why are you here again?"

Tonks leaned up and whispered briefly in Remus' ear. After a second, Remus nodded and looked at Harry. Tonks has some news from Edgar. There's been a change of plans. Do you want Ginny to know?

Harry continued idly drumming his fingers. How sensitive is it?

Remus shrugged. Sighing, Harry focused on Tonks and prepared to talk to her directly. She could always hear him, but for some reason his voice was either so quiet that she never fully understood him, or it was like sticking her head into a speaker at full volume. Resolving the why and wherefore behind this problem was another item on his laundry list for Remus conversations, but it would have to wait for another day. Tonks. If it's particularly sensitive, no. Otherwise, yes.

Tonks groaned and buried her head into Remus' shoulder, shaking slightly. Harry sighed briefly. It had clearly been one of the cases of too-loud rather than too-quiet. "Sorry, Tonks."

"Dammit, Harry!" Tonks sat up and rubbed at her temples for a second. "I told you to stop doing that!"

As Christine and Ginny looked on in puzzlement, Tonks scowled at him threateningly. Harry was unfazed by it, having seen her truly angry as opposed to mildly annoyed. "Next time, be more explicit, and I won't have to."

Ginny suddenly had a look of comprehension on her face as Christine started tapping her chin with one long finger. Christine finally voiced her suspicions directly. "You all use Legilimency that freely?" Harry was unsure what her facial expression was, but he thought it might almost be disapproval.

Remus chuckled slightly at Christine before pointing at Harry. "The more time you spend around him, the more you'll have to do it. So blame him."

"That's an invasion of privacy and against the law." There was little room for negotiation based on her tone.

"Not completely," Harry replied calmly. "To be completely accurate, between consenting adults, it's perfectly legal. And if a guardian has approved, it's also legal for minors. Needless to say, we all have approval for it. Ginny doesn't, but she's asked her parents for permission to learn the skills with a private adult tutor."

Tonks waved her hand to draw Christine's attention. "Don't argue the law with Harry, you'll lose. I still owe him from the last argument." Sitting up again, she drew her wand and secured the room from eavesdroppers.

"Right, the Wizengamot is still in an emergency meeting that started at noon. Word is that Fudge came back in a right state after his trip here this morning to see Dumbledore, and he's getting a bit paranoid." She looked directly at Harry. "You bringing Edgar here was a mistake, Harry. They're going to put in laws banning Dark creatures from Hogwarts and the grounds around it. They won't trust the wards anymore."

Harry frowned for a moment. "What about Remus?"

Tonks shot an apologetic look at her boyfriend before touching his face gently with one hand. "He'll be banned, too. Violation is straight to Azkaban for a minimum one-year sentence."

“Why would Remus be banned?” Ginny was clearly surprised by the comment.

Harry looked at Remus, making it clear the decision was solely his own. Remus in turn sighed before hugging Tonks and looking back at Ginny. “Werewolf.”

Ginny just stared with wide eyes for the longest time, while Christine appeared unsurprised by the comment. Finally regaining external control, Ginny smiled sadly at Remus. “I’m sorry, Remus. You don’t deserve that.”

Remus visibly relaxed when Ginny failed to become accusatory. “Thanks, Ginny. Don’t worry, we’ll work something out for your Occlumency and Legilimency lessons once your parents agree to it.”

Harry wanted to laugh, knowing that no one would be approaching Mr and Mrs Weasley about the topic, but in front of Christine they would have to put on a bit of a show.

“Hey, Tonks.” Harry decided to change the topic. “What’s the deal with Kingsley’s voice?”

Tonks looked confused. “What do you mean?”

Christine smiled vaguely. “It’s such a nice voice, isn’t it?”

Remus started laughing while Tonks shot a speculative look at her partner. Harry coughed slightly, getting Tonks’ attention again. “It sounds off, that’s all. Kind of... melodic, I guess.”

While Christine hummed for a second, a sly smile appeared on Tonks’ face. “His mother’s from Jamaica, so you’re hearing a bit of her lilt.”

“Oh.” Harry paused to scratch the back of his head. “That would do it, I suppose. Did you two know the Aurors that were with Lucius Malfoy?”

Ginny flinched slightly at the Malfoy name but otherwise remained steady. While Tonks and Christine exchanged a long look, Harry Summoned the chair across the aisle from himself and had it slide to a halt beside Ginny. A second Summoning Charm brought one for Christine. Both ladies sank into the chairs without a comment, although Ginny mimed a short bout of applause at Harry.

“Yeah, I did,” Tonks said quietly. “I doubt they were possessed or under the influence of something. They were two of The Snits.”

Harry paused to rub at his ears. “I’m sorry. Did you say Snits?”

Tonks grinned a bit at him. “Yeah. That’s what we call them. You know Moody was called back?”

Harry and Remus both nodded, their expressions curious. Ginny looked slightly confused.

“Well, Fudge wanted him to first make sure the overall Auror corps was up to snuff on the tough ones like Imperius and such. So Moody called everyone through one at a time. He’s not a Dark Lord, but he’s right strong-willed, so when he casts that curse on you, it’s hard to resist. If you can’t stalemate it or throw off his curse, you have to go through a ‘refresher course’ with Moody on basic Auror training.”

Christine snorted in her efforts to cover up a laugh. Tonks rolled her eyes a bit before she started laughing, too. “You should see it. Most of them are the younger kids, only out of training for a year or two. They get so puffed up by the personal training of the legendary Mad-Eye Moody. It’s like they are miniature Moody titches running around. Kingsley started calling them Moody’s Baby Snits, and it just kind of stuck as The Snits.”

Harry and Remus were grinning openly, while Ginny was only looking a little less confused. “Constant Vigilance!” Remus yelled, making Ginny jump and glare at him.

Harry looked back at Tonks for a second and tried to fight down his manic grin. “So why do you suppose they were so edgy with me?”

Tonks regarded him sympathetically before glancing at Ginny and then back at Harry. "Moody's been ranting a bit about you and the Daily Prophet articles. He's saying 'Constant Vigilance' means not only being suspicious of unknown bad guys, but also the so-called good guys, too. He keeps drilling them on the 'trust no one' and 'keep your wand handy' philosophy." Tonks shrugged after a second. "We've got a pool running on how long before they all carry their own hip flasks."

Sighing, Tonks climbed out of Remus' bed with evident reluctance before walking over to Harry and giving him a crushing hug. "We've got to get going. Give me that memory of the fight in the corridor so we can pop over to St Mungo's, yeah?"

Remus sat up a bit straighter upon hearing about the fight for the first time, his eyes narrowing as he stared at Harry. Harry, for his part, just grinned at Tonks as he took the glass vial from her hand and dropped the memory into it.

"What fight?" Remus asked quietly. Harry waved the question off as though it would be explained later.

Tonks again gave Ginny a quick look before turning her attention back to Harry. "How'd you know that wasn't Filch, Harry?"

Harry glanced sharply at Tonks. He was aware that she knew fully well how he probably detected that, but Christine and Ginny were not, as yet, privy to that information since no one had discussed it with him. Harry adopted a blank expression. "You'll have to get that information from Cyril, Tonks. I can't reveal that to you."

Tonks, nodding her acceptance for what he was really saying, pocketed the memory and stepped over beside Christine. Before she could say anything, Madam Pomfrey returned to the room, quickly heading over toward Remus.

Tonks shot a smile at the mediwitch before she grabbed Remus' toes through the blankets to get his attention off of Harry. "Remus, you need to get out of here before that decree is made final. From what

we heard, that sounds like it will be tonight. I'll see you where eagles fly tomorrow, alright? Oh, and Padfoot sends his regards, and he'll be waiting for you later."

Madam Pomfrey stepped up to Remus' bed and nodded as well. "She's quite right, Remus. Minerva was explaining what's going on to me. We need to get you out of here, so let's get you where you need to be now."

With a polite nod to everyone, Christine followed Tonks out of the infirmary and left the three of them with Madam Pomfrey.

The matron paused to glance at Harry and Ginny for a moment. "Mr Potter, you know you need to stay here tonight. Miss Weasley, is there anything you need, or are you just visiting?"

Ginny hesitantly smiled at the woman. "Ah, I'd like to eat dinner here if possible. That way I can talk to Harry before you close the infirmary at eight."

Madam Pomfrey nodded briefly before calling out for a house-elf. "Emma!" A small elf appeared at her feet. "Please bring another dinner tray for Miss Weasley, as well as a full tea and dessert tray for Mr Potter and Miss Weasley and myself." The small elf smiled quickly and disappeared.

Remus shot Harry a look of displeasure at not knowing whatever had transpired earlier, but Madam Pomfrey hurried him out of the infirmary before he could press the matter.

When it was just the two of them in the infirmary, Ginny looked at Harry for a moment before wrinkling her nose. "Is this still a typical day?"

Harry was too busy grinning about Tonks' explanation of The Snits to really think about the question much. "Plots, intrigue, fights, moronic Wizengamot decrees, and pranks? Yeah, seems about right."

The reappearance of the house-elf by the big table in the back of the infirmary to drop off Ginny's dinner tray made Harry look up and think



about what might be coming for dessert. Seconds later, a full tea service was laid out, along with what he was sure amounted to bread pudding and treacle tart.

Motioning Ginny to the back of the room, Harry dropped down and poured them both some tea while Ginny put the Theory of Magic tome on the table and sat in front of the dinner tray.

Harry noticed that Ginny was still watching him. "This is what you do for fun?"

Shrugging slightly and unable to fully lose the grin, Harry helped himself to some treacle tart. "Fun is relative. Would you rather be running around the lake? This beats doing homework to me. Now, why did you really follow me up here?"

Ginny apparently ignored the question as she quietly ate part of her dinner. "Did you know Parvati and Lavender think you're behind Trelawney becoming Head of Slytherin?"

Harry smiled vaguely. "And I should care what they think because...?"

Ginny ate a little more before reacting. "I think most people realise you're why Snape has had his downfall. Those two, among others, are really unhappy that Trelawney is the new Head of Slytherin. They practically worship the ground she walks on and would do anything for the dippy old fraud."

"Mmmm." Harry kept his vague smile on, wondering if there might be some way he could learn to act a little like the odd Ravenclaw girl, Luna, he had met earlier in the day. "I still don't see why I should care what they think."

Ginny shrugged absently. "I just thought you should know. Not everyone that dislikes you does so because of your violence or Dark rituals, or whatever ignorant rubbish the Prophet publishes daily."

Her casual observation made Harry laugh for a moment. "Right. Two vapid types are going to plot my death in the hopes that they can get the Divination teacher to themselves again."

Ginny arched one eyebrow at him but said nothing as she finished her dinner. Harry noted that she only ate about three quarters of it, but sampled equally from everything on the tray. Catching his look, she flushed slightly. "All that running left me starving. I ate a big snack in the kitchens earlier."

Harry waved the comment off. "Your body is still figuring things out. Don't eat too much, but you should eat more for the next couple of weeks when you find yourself hungry until you know how much you really need."

Ginny just nodded quietly. "Thank you for agreeing to teach and train me, Harry. I know you don't particularly want to."

"Want to, eh?" Harry grunted noncommittally. "Want is awfully close to wish. There are things that need to be done, and things that would be nice if they happened. I never depend on the second, but I try to take care of the first."

"Still, thank you for agreeing."

Harry sat sipping his tea and regarding the redhead for a long moment. "You're welcome, Ginny." Deciding it was time to shift gears, he glanced at his watch for a second. "You realise September is rapidly rolling along, and you're no closer to winning our bet?"

Ginny's mouth fell open for a second before a glint came into her eye. "And you think I'm incapable, Mr Potter?"

Harry smirked. "I haven't been overly impressed with your payback plans as yet, Miss Weasley."

Just as Ginny appeared ready to launch a major retort, the infirmary doors banged open. McGonagall, Pomfrey, and the two Aurors came in, floating the recognisable body of Filch between them.

“Miss Weasley,” Madam Pomfrey called out, “I’m sorry, but I must ask you to leave. If you’re still hungry, dinner is still on in the Great Hall. Mr Potter, to your bed when you finish, please.”

Ginny shot Harry a look he was hard-pressed to not laugh at. “This is only just the beginning, Mr Potter. You’ll be begging for my mercy soon.”

Harry winked at her and waved merrily as she hefted the heavy book to her chest and marched out of the room. Harry found himself the focus of McGonagall’s gaze as the redhead stormed out, nearly slamming the doors in her irritation. As the Aurors and Madam Pomfrey surrounded Filch, who was now lying on one of the beds, McGonagall came to sit opposite Harry with a gentle sigh.

“Do you lack for opponents, Mr Potter?”

Her tone was hard to identify, but Harry suspected it was closest to simply exhausted. “Not at all, Professor. I was just enjoying winding up her temper a bit.” Harry poured the stern professor a cup of tea without prompting.

McGonagall accepted the tea with a nod before watching him over her glasses. “Be careful when you play with fire, Mr Potter. Now, let me inform you of what we found, so you may tell Cyril when he returns tomorrow. Poppy tells me you will be released in the morning, but Cyril will probably spend the rest of the week here.”

When Harry nodded his understanding while helping himself to some bread pudding, McGonagall placed her half-empty cup down on the table. “Mr Filch was found unconscious in the wardrobe of his office. His cat, Mrs Norris, was hiding in the office and was quite frantic. Poppy tells me he has had several powerful Confundus charms placed upon him over a matter of months and has had a few Obliviate spells placed on him as well. His current condition is quite serious.”

Harry paused to consider the implications of tampering for so long. “That would push it back to last year, and the Triwizard Tournament,

correct?" At McGonagall's nod, Harry let his eyes go unfocused as he drifted through memories for a moment. "What else, Professor?"

"I received a message from Kingsley. Lucius was, indeed, Lucius. Draco in reality was Mr Crabbe, senior. Filch was Mr Goyle, senior. Unlike their children, the fathers are actually quite intelligent. We suspect some brain damage with the children, perhaps from some childhood punishment that got out of hand, but we have not been able to prove anything." McGonagall paused to drink the rest of her tea. "Mr Goyle, when the Polyjuice ran out, was missing his right hand. Kingsley is looking into whether he was the one outside of the Headmaster's office last week."

Harry nodded as more pieces of the puzzle were falling onto the table before him. "So how did Filch get out of St Mungo's last week?"

McGonagall stood and drew her robes about her. "Auror Tonks is looking into that question. She sent me a brief notice that he apparently left without being checked out, almost immediately after regaining consciousness. That in itself tells us a great deal. When I know more, I shall inform you or Cyril. Good night, Mr Potter."

Harry smiled tightly. "Good night, Professor. For what it's worth, I'm very sorry to be the cause of so many problems."

The professor stared at him for a moment before nodding slightly. As she left the infirmary, Harry went back to his bed, glancing over at the two Aurors sitting in chairs across the way. Madam Pomfrey was working diligently over the body of Filch, and Harry could hear a mewling sound outside the Infirmary doors... most likely Mrs Norris.

Drawing the curtains around his bed, Harry pulled his notebooks to himself from the bedside table. If he would be spending another night here, he thought he might finish some work before falling asleep. Harry paused for a second to open the window, knowing that he would be hearing from at least one person sometime tonight.

Harry was still writing when, at nearly 10 o'clock, an owl swept into the infirmary and imperiously held out a leg for Harry. He took the

scroll and thanked the owl, which promptly flew out of the window. Unrolling the parchment, Harry read the short note.

Harry,

Due to the change in status, which I have been told you are aware of, I am unable to discuss this in person. We shall discuss this fully tomorrow eve. In the meantime, get a copy of the Prophet in the morning. There is a major announcement in there.

In other news, your aims regarding Lucius have been wildly successful, especially considering the fiasco he was involved with tonight. I have been notified by our contacts that he has reached the point at which you desired to place him.

On the other hand, while we did achieve many successes in the Emergency Session thanks to all the work ahead of time, we have taken a few setbacks as well. Do your best to keep your head down. I'll have full copies of the laws for you to read tomorrow.

As a bit of warning, your father is most anxious to speak to you. He has not intimated why.

Good luck on the morrow.

-E

As Harry conceded the notion of completing any further work and prepared himself for bed, he was left wondering what exactly the Prophet would have to say tomorrow. It was always full of lies and the usual Ministry Propaganda.

Pausing with his pyjamas on, Harry saw the mirror that Cyril insisted he look at every night by the head of his bed. Sighing, he stood before it, his usual efforts to meet his own gaze failing once more.

Tonight, as he reflected on what happened during the turbulent day, all he could see clearly was the scar above his eyes.

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A/N:

Alright, with Echoes my betas frequently tell me I'm too subtle with my plot. I admit, I like little details that fold together and tie back to make big pictures more vivid and imagination catching. There are more things already out there for you to wonder about, and even more are coming.

Four chapters for just Sunday... that was a long day, wasn't it? Don't worry, most days won't be like that one for poor Harry. And that means most days won't require four chapters to get through. Some people have noticed that "there be a lot of words here" for so few days. I could always wrap it up in a sentence or three, but would it still be worth reading?

Christine Pasteur as a character has been seen in one form or another elsewhere, most notably by the author of MOOving stories. This will be a new spin on an original character.

JKR has on her website notes that the Weasley cousin who is a Squib and accountant has a daughter that was meant to be a Slytherin. She was replaced character-wise for the plot with the lovely Rita Skeeter. My choice to bring in the daughter by the right name and personality, but to leave her as non-magical, is to explain why she hasn't been seen at Hogwarts previously.

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to Chreechree and cwarbeck. Thanks to Reg and other folks for lending their Brit-picking data, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

## Chapter 21 : Twists...

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Having briefly explored the six fundamental particle types representing magical energy, and given the existence of a magical core, the final question to ask is how do we, as magic-using individuals, actually use the unique form of energy that has been made available to us. Careful study and experimentation has revealed that all living creatures have pathways to channel the magic in their core throughout their body, hereafter referred to as conduits, although the majority of conduits appear to terminate at the top of the epidermal layer.

Unlike magical cores, conduits come in different types and sizes. For each type of fundamental magical energy particle – Bond, Break, Change, Control, Create, and Destroy – there is a corresponding type of conduit that is only capable of draining that type of fundamental particle from the magical core. Every living creature contains a mixture of conduits, with different species exhibiting specific overall trends in frequency, distribution, and clustering which are a signature of that particular species. Within a species' overall signature, however, there is great variation in the exact placement, sizing, relative type, and distribution of conduits within the general species trend, much like a fingerprint is believed to be unique among humans.

Before magical training begins, the conduits of the body are on par with a young bird that has had its wings tied to its back since hatching. While the wings and the necessary muscles to use those wings are present, they are under-developed and lack conscious control. The same holds true for the conduits, in that they lack conscious control and are poorly developed – if at all – by the time most students begin magical training. The process of formal schooling in wizards and witches will overcome these initial handicaps given appropriate time and practice, eventually allowing the full use of the magical core, although few students ever rise above the established curriculum. The conventional educational paradigm inhibits attaining the true potential in nearly every student, primarily due to the late age at which training begins. During childhood, the mind is much more flexible and capable of learning new things, and this ability is retarded

with age as actively used neural pathways become fixated and alternate pathways fade away. This is the same principle shown when a child who is blind at birth and later gains sight at the age of five years never develops depth perception to go with the vision.

These problems aside, classical methods for magical training are sufficient to develop a minimal level of mastery over innate skills and resources for a particularly hard-working individual. Training and regular magic use do have a secondary effect in that conduits may become larger. While the total number of conduits is set by birth and is, therefore, immutable, their capacity to carry energy can be altered through rigorous magical training. The drawback to any such training, however, is the exaggerated physical repercussions to channelling energy. As the magical core is drained through the conduits, those conduits in use accumulate heat as a by-product. The human body dissipates the excess heat by having the blood stream carry away the surplus, allowing the body to cool itself through normal means: perspiration, heavy breathing, and eventually loss of consciousness, if necessary, as the body seeks to inhibit further heat build-up. Artificial means to augment the efficiency of the body, such as Cooling Charms, may enhance the cooling capacity at the epidermal surface; however, this increases the risk of serious injury to the recipient...

... Excerpt from Theory of Magic, Volume I, Section I, edited by R.J.L

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Mon, 11 Sep 1995, 7:09 am

Harry was startled directly into an aware state, his breathing accelerated and heart racing from some fragment of an unknowable dream, only faintly conscious of his immediate surroundings. As he lay on his left side under the blankets, his vision swam into focus, and he perceived a hand holding a wand approaching the right side of his face.

Reacting on instinct, Harry snapped his own right hand out to wrench the approaching wand and hand straight up, twisting sharply to rotate the wrist outward and drove his assailant to the ground with a grunt of



pain. Simultaneously sliding out of the bed, his left hand rose and fell in a rigid knife edge, and was streaking toward the back of his opponent's neck when he finally became fully conscious and realised he was in the hospital wing. Moreover, he was startled to find out that he was about to seriously injure Madam Pomfrey, who was crying out from the continued pressure on her wrist and arm.

Hastily, Harry released her while stepping back and stopping the potentially deadly blow to the back of her neck. Harry back-pedalled two or three steps before taking a few deep breaths to calm his racing heart and to regain his apparently long-lost mental balance.

"I'm sorry," he finally got out, somewhat loudly and abruptly. "Really sorry, Madam Pomfrey."

The mediwitch was on her knees, ignoring Harry as she kept her back to him. He could see how she awkwardly used her wand in her left hand to cast diagnostics on her right arm and wrist. Finally casting a spell on the wrist he had been fully prepared to shatter after smashing the back of her neck, the mediwitch slowly climbed to her feet and gave Harry such an excruciatingly close visual scrutiny that he found himself shifting from foot to foot.

"Mr Potter, do you normally wake up and immediately try to kill people?" Her tone was clearly a no-nonsense demand for immediate and total compliance, rather than a casual inquiry as to whether his dreams had been sweet and fluffy.

"Er, sometimes?" Harry knew that his half-hearted answer would not pass muster if she really wanted to press the issue, and her frown made it clear that she intended to push. "I tend to have, er, violent dreams. If someone tries to grab me during one, well... Remus healed quickly enough."

The continued inspection was enough to make him feel like he was about to become very intimate with her wand in ways he really did not want to experience. Especially as his stomach was registering its complaint at being currently empty, and its rumblings were clearly audible. After a couple of days of continuous rest and no training, his

body always slipped easily into a lackadaisical state, although his appetite remained the same as if he was still working out every day. This was going to have to change unless the matron released him soon.

“I suppose some dreams are unavoidable, from what I understand, Mr Potter. You do realise that such dreams are not conducive to healthy sleep?” At Harry’s hesitant nod, she continued as though lecturing a particularly slow and dim-witted student. “And you do know that inhibits you from thinking or performing well?”

Harry sighed, already anticipating the direction this conversation was going. “Yes, Madam Pomfrey.”

“Then why do you not take steps to counteract them? Therapy, Dreamless Sleeping Draughts, an Elixir of Peace, or the like?” She was now tapping the tip of her wand into her left hand, and Harry decided abruptly that he was not going to continue to feel bad if she was going to push him towards places he had no intention of going willingly.

Harry let his tone cool as he replied, wishing to convey that this topic would not be discussed beyond this once. “Therapy is not really an option for me, and every potion you can name has nasty side effects if used regularly, more so if it is used every night. What with addiction, toxin build up in the liver, elevated blood pressure, uncontrolled weight loss or gain, inability to focus mentally, and some other really unpleasant problems, those types of potions are only good for single doses – every fortnight at the most. Even that can pose serious long-term risks with such a close dosage schedule.”

The tableau was frozen for several moments. Madam Pomfrey slowly tapped her wand into her hand as she regarded Harry, who defiantly stared back at her, his expression carefully blank.

“I see. Should you be in my care, Mr Potter, and I deem it necessary for you to take one of these potions, you will do so. However, I will not order them unless strictly necessary. Is that clear?” She had stopped

tapping her wand, but Harry somehow knew that this point was non-negotiable.

“Crystal.”

Nodding, she gestured loosely toward the door. “You are free to go, Mr Potter. Normally, I would have had an elf pick up some clothes and such for you, but they informed me that they cannot gain ingress into your room. If you hurry, you should have ample time for a normal breakfast in the Great Hall. If you tarry, you will be forced to settle for a hasty meal or none at all.”

Harry nodded his head in acquiescence before he paused and looked at her again, a hint of embarrassment colouring his face. “I am very sorry about that, Madam Pomfrey. Thanks a lot for taking care of me.” With a bit of a flush and a half smile, Harry gathered his possessions and grabbed his broom to head back to his rooms and change.

“Impossible as it may seem to you, Mr Potter, I do know somewhat about life. In the meantime, if you would please leave, I need to go to St Mungo’s to fetch that Mentor of yours from Healer Worthy’s clutches as well as to check up on Mr Filch. You may drop by anytime after noon, and Cyril should be settled.” She had no smile to offer, but Harry thought that her tone was much softer than he had any right to expect after the rather rude treatment he had given her arm earlier. That aside, this woman must have dealt with other hostile reactions in the past from patients with equally disturbed backgrounds, so perhaps she would hold no grudge over the incident.

“You moved Filch?” Harry looked around in surprise, but the only evidence of occupation in the infirmary was his own dishevelled bed and the walls forming the headmaster’s protected private room. There was not a trace of the events from the prior night.

Sighing, Madam Pomfrey started walking back toward her office. “The tampering with his faculties was more... extensive than expected. He needs more specialised care than I am able to provide. According to Professor McGonagall, that is all I may tell you, and you are not to repeat that information.”

Harry paused to consider the ramifications of such a statement. In the short term, it meant that Filch was out of the castle, although his cat was likely to still be prowling around despite his absence – if a bit lonely and vindictive. In the long term, it suggested that plots at Hogwarts had been in place for a longer timeframe than anyone yet realised, and the methods involved were deeper and darker than anticipated.

Harry found himself sighing in turn. “Message delivered, Madam Pomfrey.”

Not wanting to deal with all the students likely to be headed to breakfast in their little groups while he was still in his pyjamas, Harry opened the window in the infirmary before winking once at the mediwitch and taking off on his broom to fly around the outside of the castle. He knew he would have no problems opening his bedroom window from the outside, although based on how well-protected his own window had been, he suspected that at least some of the other closed windows would probably be quite difficult.

After all, he spent quite a few minutes layering protective charms and hexes on his window after he had disabled the lock on it last week. There was only so much staring into a mirror he could take in one go before the walls started closing in.

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Mon, 11 Sep 1995, 7:44 am

Moving toward the Great Hall with just over fifteen minutes to spare, Harry lay flat on his broom as he pushed the Firebolt to its maximum acceleration. It made the twists and turns of the corridors a bit exciting, and it was a more interesting way to fully wake up than a boring and easy flight around the outside of the castle. Harry ignored the yells of random students, two startled ghosts, and one outraged suit of armour that was slowly clanking down the halls after him while shaking a big stick dramatically.

“Mr Potter.” The condescending, sickeningly sweet, and not very dulcet tones of Dolores Umbridge were easy to ignore as he raced over her head down the final set of stairs towards the entranceway and the Great Hall.

Harry needed to have a word with the Headmaster about placing those bits of armour on the inside edges of very sharp corners when they were carrying lances in addition to the usual sheathed sword. Just barely clipping that lance at almost twenty miles per hour was going to leave quite the bruise on his left thigh.

“Mr Potter!” Umbridge’s sudden increase in volume revealed her annoyance, but Harry was confident that he could always defend his feigned deafness by saying he had to concentrate on the broom at those speeds. A diversion could be fatal, and not just to him.

The buffering charms on the broom kept the wind from unseating him as he approached the pressure and wind a severe gale exerted, his broom hitting nearly fifty miles per hour in the long corridor. Without the countless magical charms all over the broom, if he ever approached the top end of one hundred fifty miles per hour the wood itself would break under the forces involved, and the twigs at the tail would leave a very short trail of destruction. As it was, Harry felt as though he had his head out the window of a lorry at a comfortable five or ten miles per hour, a rather easy bit of weather to compensate for.

“Mr Potter!” Her voice had now risen shrilly as he continued to ignore her, but his trip was almost over, and she was behind him, all the way back at the top of the stairs. He had plenty of time to grab some food and get to his tutoring session if he refused to be delayed.

The wind was whistling as he shot through the open doors into the Great Hall and aimed directly for the end of the Gryffindor table that the twins had taken to occupying since the inception of their dubious partnership with Harry. He ignored the cries of protest and outrage as the air pressure whipped robes, napkins, and papers about in his wake, although he was a bit sorry about toppling the odd pastry here and there. Harry slammed on the brakes and slowed to a more civilised speed right before landing at the empty seat between the

twins, seeing Hermione, Ginny, and Neville opposite him as he sat down. Ron was lurking on the far side of Hermione, toward the centre of the table, but was resolutely turned away by the time Harry was seated.

“Mr Potter!” The voice was now firmly and loudly calling in the background, but Harry was far too focused on what was in front of him to pay it much mind.

Something about the table was very much out of place, but Harry was baffled for a second as to what it was. Then it registered quickly. Hermione’s plate, normally squeaky clean after every meal, was covered in some kind of residue and indiscernible mishmash. Opening his mouth to ask what was going on, Harry was abruptly silenced by Ginny jamming a copy of the Daily Prophet directly into his face.

“Read this!” she hissed with urgency.

Harry barely had a chance to glance at the headline –

Ministry Seeks Educational Reform!

Dolores Umbridge Appointed!

First Ever High Inquisitor!

by Rita Skeeter

– before the paper was jerked out of his hands. “Mr Potter!” a voice shouted from behind him, huffing and puffing a bit, probably from the effort of running down stairs in order to catch up with him.

Standing up and turning around, Harry was unsurprised to find himself looking down at the aforementioned Dolores Umbridge. Taking a deep breath, Harry screamed back at her. “What would you wish, Madam Dark Arts Professor?”

Shocked, she took a half-step back before glowering at Harry. “Do not shout at me, Mr Potter! Apologise!” Though she was no longer yelling at him, her tone was far from polite, and every eye in the Great Hall was watching the exchange.

Harry matched her new volume as best he could, despite how uncomfortably loud it still was. “You thought yelling at this range was okay! Perhaps you would like to apologise first?” Harry knew his patronising smile would not endear him to her, but the woman before him would never be a friend even under the best of circumstances.

“Detention for your attitude, Mr Potter!”

Harry smiled widely. “Oh, so sorry, Professor. I must check my schedule! I’m in detention until sometime in December at least. Shall I get back to you on scheduling that one? How does 9th January sound to you?”

Apparently opting to ignore his further barbs, she paused to glower at him with open distaste as she took several deep breaths to get her lungs back under control. Shaking out the paper that she had so rudely taken from him, she ignored his earlier performance and adopted a rather minatory smile as she kept her eyes locked on his. “As you can see, Mr Potter,” she said in a voice dripping with liquid honey, “I have been appointed High Inquisitor of Hogwarts. I have the power to investigate, and, if necessary, alter the behaviour of those who make this place unsafe and unproductive.” Pointing one thick and ugly finger at Harry’s broom, she smiled serenely at him. “For safety reasons, Mr Potter, there will no longer be any flying of brooms inside this castle. Not by you, not by anyone.”

Moans echoed from around the room. As Harry glanced around, he saw quite a few students with their brooms at the breakfast tables – except at the Slytherin table, that is. Those students were watching Harry’s confrontation with what he could only describe as distant if pleased expressions. Closer to home, Fred and George in particular looked ready to murder the woman attempting to lambaste Harry as they each had a hand on their Quidditch brooms. Hermione looked like she was going to be ill at the blatant disrespect Harry was cavalierly showing a figure in authority.

“Actually, you’re not the High Fibbity Fitsy Foo.” Harry’s casual statement in a voice pitched to carry caused much of the muttered whispering going on to die down. “First, a moronic piece of gossip in the Daily Prophet does not make something true. Otherwise, I would be well on my way to becoming the most feared Dark Lord in a millennium, and I would exclusively wear pink socks. Neither of those is true. Second, by Albion Wizengamot procedures, any new law must be posted in its entirety in all main public gathering places, as well as every Ministry-funded institution. I see no postings here in what you yourself pointed out was a Ministry-funded institution.”

Harry smirked as he fondled his broom for a second. “So sorry, Madam Dark Arts. You’re just a plain old professor... at best.”

Her mouth stretched into a deep frown as her face contorted into perhaps the ugliest attempt at a glower Harry had ever seen. Without acknowledging Harry’s argument, Umbridge marched over to the bulletin board by the doors into the Great Hall. With a flourish, she pulled down a short piece of paper and all but stomped back over to Harry, thrusting it at him.

Harry casually caught the fluttering paper and glanced at it, wondering if she was really so poor at magic that a simple Accio was too much for her.

By Order of the Ministry of Magic

Educational Decree No. 23

Hogwarts High Inquisitor

The Ministry of Magic hereby creates the post of Hogwarts High Inquisitor, with all the rights and powers thereunto for investigation into the activities and credentials of those at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Further, Cornelius Fudge appoints Dolores Umbridge to the post indefinitely.

Signed,



Cornelius Fudge

Minister of Magic

Harry rolled his eyes dramatically before balling the paper up and tossing it over his shoulder. He ignored the bulging eyes and complete outrage on Umbridge's face. "Okay, perhaps you didn't hear me. That wasn't a law, with all the terms spelled out. It was a memo or notice of someone doing something. Doesn't mean a thing, legally. I could post a note like that naming myself God-Emperor, and it would amount to the same thing. Cheers!"

Harry promptly turned his back to the woman and returned to his seat. Grabbing the tray of pastries, Harry dropped two on his plate as he piled up bangers and drew the clotted cream and jam closer to him.

Umbridge, however, clearly had other plans. Gone was the saccharine tone and the pseudo-friendly smile which normally concealed her loathing. In its place was a voice that matched the ugliness normally found both without and within. "Mr Potter! You cannot destroy official notices from the Ministry with impunity! You may think you have the upper hand now, but you and I both know that my position has been created legally! Whether it's today or one week from today, I will be the High Inquisitor, and you will answer to me!"

Glancing at his watch while ignoring how the students around him were leaning away, as though to avoid any spill-over from Umbridge's ceaseless ranting, Harry realised that he had very little time to eat if he was going to go with Neville for some Herbology tutoring shortly. Sighing, Harry stood up and turned back to face Umbridge while she droned on.

Carefully schooling his face, he suddenly affected what he hoped was a mingled look of horror and surprise, before pointing behind her and screaming, "Vampires!" As she turned in shock while pulling out her wand, Harry disillusioned himself and sat back down while keeping his eyes on her back, striving to become motionless. In the seconds of frantic searching it took Umbridge to comprehend that there were actually no vampires present in any form, the camouflage charm

stabilised and Harry became impossible to see without some kind of magical intervention.

Watching Umbridge turn back around, Harry had to fight hard to not laugh at her facial expression. Umbridge's face was deep red in anger and embarrassment. "Mr Potter! That stunt –"

Harry was almost willing to lay odds that she was about to cry from frustration. Her eyes still bulging, she was looking furtively from side to side, clearly trying to understand what had just happened and failing. "Where did he go?!" she demanded of Fred.

Fred shrugged while slowly losing the battle to a wicked smirk, batting a paper ball back and forth between his hands. "Looks to me like he's turned himself invisible. He was there; then he wasn't. Maybe he Apparated. I've heard he can do that inside the castle. Must be one of those secret Ministry Unapproved Dark Lord powers."

Seething, Umbridge continued to glare about the room before she scuttled off, muttering about searching the castle until she found Harry and taught him some proper manners. As she exited the room, Harry released the Disillusionment Charm and resumed smothering his scones in cream and jam. Noticing the absolute silence coming from the people sitting around him, Harry just shot one eyebrow up as he quickly scanned them. "What?"

Neville shook his head slowly as he regarded Harry with a sad expression. "You know you just completely hacked off a professor that already had it in for you?"

Harry shrugged while trying to politely wolf down his breakfast.

Neville smiled in a vague way that reminded Harry faintly of Luna. "You know that when she does become Inquisitor, she'll do all she can to make your life non-stop misery?"

Harry waited until his mouth was empty to respond properly. "Oh, right, and that will be different how? She's already out for my blood but has to wait in line."

George clapped Harry on the back firmly. "That's our Dark Lord. All uncaring in the face of Ministry authority. Speaking of caring, young Harry, you really need to care more about your dedicated devotees. Right, Fred?"

Fred nodded his head sagely, one hand stroking his chin. "Too true, George, too true. Why, take just now for example. I'd swear our Dark Lord knows how to turn invisible, yet he hasn't taught his followers how he does it. What kind of leadership is that?"

Ginny and Neville were smiling somewhat at the antics, but Hermione still looked shocked that Harry had so casually blown off Umbridge. Ron looked torn between wanting to smile and wanting to flee from the table entirely. The rest of the Gryffindors and students around the hall had a myriad of expressions, ranging from disbelief to pleasure and even glee. The Slytherins, however, retained their new strange state of expression. Harry was unsure exactly what their glances said, but he was sure it was something odd, almost like some kind of amusement, anger, and guilt all rolled into one.

Sighing and pushing the strange house members out of his head, Harry spared a glance at each of the twins. "Why exactly would I wish to teach you how to be more effective at sneaking about?"

Any response the twins might have wanted to provide was cut off by Professor McGonagall's amplified voice ringing through the hall. "Students! Attention, please!" Harry, along with everyone else, craned his neck to see the Deputy Headmistress standing by the doors into the Great Hall.

"It is my duty to inform you that Potions classes are cancelled for this week." She had to pause while excited voices broke out and quite a few of the younger students actually gave a soft cheer. "Professor Snape will not be in the castle, and we have no substitute prepared. These classes will resume next week. And Mr Potter, please join me immediately."

Checking his watch, Harry observed that he still had a few minutes before first lessons would begin. Harry grabbed his bag and broom

before glancing at Neville. "See you outside in a bit, Neville." Cradling his broom over his shoulder, Harry walked over to McGonagall as she coolly watched him come closer.

As Harry neared her, the tall woman turned and began walking out into the corridor, leaving him to fall into step with her. "Mr Potter, would you care to explain why Madam Umbridge is storming through the castle looking for you?"

Harry smiled absently. "Maybe she just can't get enough of me?"

The pervasive silence as he walked with McGonagall toward the Headmaster's office was evidence enough that she did not enjoy the answer. "All right, then," Harry said resignedly. "She ranted at me about her being some 'Super Questioner' appointed by the Ministry, and I pointed out that until new laws have been properly posted in their entirety, they don't go into effect. She's still just the same as she was yesterday, rather powerless and extremely dowdy. She got uppity about it, and I might have pulled a disappearing act on her just so I could eat in some peace and quiet."

The staccato echoes of their footsteps rang out as they continued down the corridor, until, after a few long moments, the professor finally responded. "According to Albus and Cyril, when you cite the law, I should pay attention to it and take it as all but fact. What you have just told me, Mr Potter, pleases me greatly. However, I fear it is only a matter of time before she becomes what she claims, and then things will become most difficult."

When they reached the gargoyle, Harry thought it was giving him a decidedly unfriendly look as McGonagall waved it aside and they proceeded up to the door outside the Headmaster's office. McGonagall stopped him there, however, before she would allow him to approach the door, leaving the two confined in a very cramped corridor. Motioning about them, the professor levelly met Harry's gaze. "We cannot be overheard in this position from the corridor, and the portraits inside will not divulge this conversation to anyone other than Albus or myself. First, as to the reason you are here, there is a man from the Ministry waiting inside to speak to you. You will curtail your natural instincts and treat this man with respect, Mr Potter. No matter

what you may suspect, he is not here to do anything other than speak to you, is that clear? There shall be no violence inside.”

Harry nodded, now both curious and dreading who had come to Hogwarts to speak with him, as well as the why of it all.

“Before you go in, I also wish to explain something. I understand that your life has been... different, Mr Potter. I understand that you have acted only in self-defence, or else taken the choices that seemed best when presented with very difficult situations.”

Harry watched her as she struggled to articulate something unpleasant. “Even with these things in mind, I still do not think you belong here at this school. You are dangerous and even reckless, though at times you are also charming and humorous. Your lack of respect for the Headmaster and the staff is something I will never approve of, no matter how justified you may be or think you may be. I find myself watching you with a mixture of horror and sympathy, Mr Potter, and I do not like feeling this way about anyone. But your apparent indifference to certain acts leaves me the most chilled.”

Clearing her throat, Harry thought she looked completely uncomfortable with the candid admission and direct honesty. “Be that as it may, I will do my best to teach you what I can, Mr Potter. I am a professional, and I will not let my personal concerns influence how I treat you. I will aid you in whatever ways I find possible, for I do understand what it is you are facing. All I wish to ask of you in return, Harry, is to remember that we are all human, we all make mistakes, and sometimes... sometimes our mistakes cost us more than we ever expected.”

Harry stood calmly, trying to understand the message that she was conveying and doing his best to guess at the more complex meanings she was surely referring to. Ultimately, Harry had to acknowledge that he felt a certain level of respect for this typically stern woman that was hard to describe. The kernel of respect had been planted by her abundant knowledge during her classroom lessons, and when combined with her firm sense of discipline and her composure and command in the hospital wing, it had secretly germinated. This blunt disclosure by the woman firmly entrenched the

feeling, and his respect for her, he knew, would likely continue to grow.

“Thank you, Professor, for your honesty. I respect that very much.” Harry had no higher compliment to offer someone than his respect, but he doubted she would appreciate that knowledge at present.

Giving him a thin smile, McGonagall nodded her head slightly, her demeanour returning to what he had witnessed previously in the Infirmary. “And if you find some way of preventing Umbridge from taking over here, Mr Potter, then I shall probably be forced to admit to actually liking you; you never know. Now, I must see you to your meeting. I shall inform Mr Longbottom that you will be late.”

Harry flashed her a wry smile, thinking about Umbridge and what he could work out with Edgar. McGonagall opened the door, and Harry followed her into the office. “Harry Potter,” she said with the faintest hint of a smirk, “may I present Arthur Weasley? I do trust that you two will behave yourselves, and I will see each of you later.”

Without another word McGonagall swept out of the office, firmly closing the door behind her. Harry found himself staring in surprise at a man with the trademark red hair of Gryffindor’s Weasley clan, albeit in less quantity. This man was clearly older, firmly in his middle age, with a frame that had once been obviously muscular and athletic but which was now somewhat softer with time and obligations. It was like looking into the future to see Ron thirty years from now. He was standing by the phoenix, absently stroking its feathers, as he regarded Harry through blue eyes framed by vintage glasses, with an overall expression that conveyed nothing.

“I take it from your expression,” the man began in a quiet voice, “that you had no warning of who was here to talk to you.”

Harry gave himself a mental shake, realising that he had been taken unawares indeed. He had been cautioned to be polite and to behave himself, and that the person was from the Ministry, but that was all. “Ah, no, sir. I was told a Ministry employee needed to speak with me, but that was it.”

Mr Weasley chuckled slightly and then gestured for Harry to sit in one of the chairs by the desk as he took his own cue by dropping into the one closest to the phoenix. There was a comfortable distance of some six feet between them. "Ah, yes, Minerva does have her own sense of style. First, Mr Potter, do you mind if I call you Harry?"

Harry glanced at the man speculatively, wondering at the question. Most adults, he had found, simply called him Harry and that was that. Somehow, the question left him feeling slightly uneasy, as though he was about to walk into an ambush he had no way of anticipating.

"Of course not, Mr Weasley."

Mr Weasley gave him a wry smile. "Thank you, then, Harry. And please, relax. I have no intention of drawing my wand on you. From what I've heard, I probably wouldn't enjoy the outcome very much anyway."

The man's voice carried such amusement that Harry found himself smiling along. "Maybe, sir. You know how rumours are, though."

Mr Weasley nodded his head as he rested his elbows on his knees and leaned forward. "True, Harry, quite true. And yet, I find myself being appreciative of your magical talents as I have watched you trade volleys in your little game with my wife."

Having expected the conversation to move in this direction, Harry was unsurprised by Mr Weasley's statement, but he still was unsure what to say. "Yes, well..."

"Relax, Harry. I'm here for a casual chat, not to shake things up." Mr Weasley's completely calm demeanour told Harry that everything really was fine, and there would be no harsh words exchanged this morning.

"Right, Mr Weasley."

"Harry, do you know anything about the Weasley family?"

Pausing to reflect on what he had learned directly and indirectly, Harry tried to summarise it as succinctly as he could. "Married, seven kids, appears to be six sons and one daughter. The twins are full of themselves and mischief, Ron is a bit hot-headed, and Ginny... well, Ginny's confusing. Your wife has some cousin that's a Squib accountant, Markus." Harry thought that his guesses about Ginny's reaction to needing different shoes would be best left out of the conversation. "That's most of what I can readily recall, sir."

"Yes, well, that's a good start I suppose." Mr Weasley laughed softly, although Harry thought it had a slightly forced note to it. "I daresay that Ginny can be somewhat confusing. She's left us all rather confused for the past few years, but that's another story."

Mr Weasley leaned back into the chair, folding his right leg over his left, and watched Harry for a few moments. "What I particularly wanted to know is whether you have heard of Molly's – that would be my wife's – brothers, Fabian and Gideon, and it sounds like you haven't."

Drumming his fingers lightly on the armchair, Mr Weasley sat regarding Harry with an expression that could only be described as calculating. "I think, Harry, that the particulars aren't so important. The one thing you should know for now is that Molly lost both of her brothers during the first war with You-Know-Who, and it was a very hard loss for her to deal with. They did not go gentle into that good night."

Harry nodded his acceptance of this information, knowing that a great many families had lost members during the first war – quite often in gruesome ways. When dealing with terrorists that hid behind masks and targeted children as often as adults, while typically avoiding any direct confrontation with the authorities, such was the outcome in both Muggle and magical worlds.

"She's rather fiercely protective of her family, quite a bit due to what happened with her brothers. You can understand that, can't you, Harry?"



Again, Harry found himself nodding. He could perfectly understand that desire to protect those that were family, and those that were like family, at all costs.

“So perhaps you can understand why she didn’t react at all well when we found out that Harry Potter had put her twin sons and her only daughter in St Mungo’s hospital after some kind of fight.”

Internally, Harry cringed. Receiving notice like that probably would have triggered all kinds of unpleasant memories, stirring pools of emotion that had been quiet for years now.

Mr Weasley waved off the apology Harry felt he owed the man, clearly wanting to not be interrupted. “I find myself torn, Harry, on how to deal with what’s going on. You see, Molly has always been quite strong-willed, driven to succeed. I’ve always been somewhat more casual about life, but then they say opposites do attract. Before we started having children, she was even thinking about opening her own shop. She’s quite the witch when it comes to charms and hexes. I remember when we were dating that she built this clock...”

Harry wanted to laugh as Mr Weasley seemed to lose himself in his own introspection, clearly recalling days long since gone past. The overt affection the man held for his wife was clear from the tone, but it was equally apparent that he would only ever see the girl he fell in love with when he looked at his wife today. Coughing slightly to regain Mr Weasley’s attention, Harry fought the urge to grin and lost. “Sir?”

“Right, sorry, Harry. The mind wanders sometimes in its wondering.” Sitting up again, Mr Weasley took a second to collect himself and smiled back at Harry. “Right. Back to the point. She’s clever, and has always been driven, and quite creative – which I think you’re learning to appreciate. Ever since Ginny and Ron came to Hogwarts, well, she’s been a bit down and depressed. All of her time spent schooling the children, caring for the family, managing everything about the family after so many years, it was suddenly all over and done with. I think she lost herself a bit there, especially since the children, wanting

to be seen as the adults they were learning to become, don't write home as often as perhaps they should. No one was asking her for her help, or for her opinion, and I think it was a little empty at the nest. There's no slight against my children implied, that's just what everyone does as they start to grow up and stand on their own. Does that make sense, Harry?"

Harry nodded, curious to see where this was leading.

"Well, now it gets complicated. I'm torn, I suppose, because I should be outraged and angry over what's been going on between you and my family, the fights and the hospital and then these pranks with my wife. Aside from losing sleep over our children, there were those Howlers, and those gnomes, and everything else..."

Mr Weasley held up a hand as Harry started to shift around a bit, expecting the verbal attack that was properly due. "No, Harry. I told you I wasn't here to yell at you. This is why I'm torn. That was one hand's view of what's happened and how I should be reacting. On the other hand, I had a letter from Fred and George that explained things, and my boys are actually impressed with you – that's either scary or fantastic, and I'm really not sure which. A few days later, we received another letter from Ginny that added some details my boys overlooked. And one of the things that hasn't escaped my notice is that my daughter is sounding, well, genuinely positive about something for a change. At the same time, I suddenly find myself confronted with the Molly I married, the woman who was fiercely creative and could charm or hex her way into or out of nearly anything. The fire is coming back in both my girls, Harry, and it's all because of you. No matter how it happened, and I do understand that it was quite accidental, I thought I might thank you."

Harry knew that he was staring in shock at Mr Weasley. He had, to some degree, been feeling both trepidation and uncertainty about the inevitable clash with the Weasley parents, but even in his more delusional moments of imagining how he would prevent a battle for blood, he had never considered something like this.

Mr Weasley was chuckling at him, but for some reason it did not bother him at all. "As far as the children go, I've had a long talk with

Albus and Minerva already. I don't really approve, Harry, but I can understand the situation. I do realise just how dangerous that was for you. They have asked us to give you a chance, so we'll do that. And just between you and me, I know those families that were involved. As hard as it is for me to say this, I think you only accelerated the natural outcome by a few years, Harry. It's hard for me to accept, and I don't like to think about it, but that's the way I see it."

Harry took a long moment to study the man before him. There was no guile, no deceit, no malice, no indirection. It was evident that he had spoken the truth as he saw it and that Mr Weasley was willing to put those events aside as something unfortunate and tragic, but ultimately unavoidable. "I appreciate your candour, sir." Harry surprised himself as he realised that he was starting to truly like Mr Weasley and that the man was making a very positive impression upon him in a very short period of time.

"Now, as for Molly... Really, Harry, I'd actually like to encourage you a bit, as it were. There's only one problem we need to address first."

Finding his voice again, Harry felt somewhat sheepish for his stunned reaction. "And that would be?"

"The line, Harry. This last one with the gnomes. Well, you tell me, given the bit about Molly's brothers. Do you think you went a bit too far with it?"

Harry paused to think of all the various phrases the garden gnomes would spout and understood that there was one phrase in particular which was the reason for this visit. "Ah, I can think of one bit that probably was."

Mr Weasley nodded his head, no hint of accusation on his face. "Yes, I'm glad you can see that. If you had known about her brothers, would you have done it that way?"

Harry shook his head, wincing at the idea. "No, sir. Of course not." Harry wanted to find some way to express his horror at the idea, but Mr Weasley just waved his acceptance of the statement.

“Excellent, Harry. I’m glad we understand each other. So long as you keep the line in mind, I’m quite happy to watch you trade barbs with Molly.” Mr Weasley’s eyes went a bit glassy as he apparently started reflecting on events again. “These past few days around the house have been just like old times...”

Harry immediately began fighting down a blush as he caught the unintentional drift of Mr Weasley’s words. “Ah, right, sir.” He desperately hoped the man would change the topic.

Mr Weasley visibly shook himself for a moment and then stood up. “Well, that’s that, then. I’m off to work, and I do work at the Ministry. Thanks for your time and understanding, Harry.”

Mr Weasley’s smile was infectious, but Harry was already smiling anyway. The man was very easy to get along with and had a ready sense of humour. “My pleasure, Mr Weasley. I enjoyed meeting you.”

“Oh, and Harry?” Harry paused as he looked back at Mr Weasley standing by the bright green flames of Floo fire. “I came here in such a way that neither of us will ever admit to anyone else that this conversation happened. We have not met each other yet. Is that clear?”

Harry had a sudden impression of the power and stern hand that could rein in the twins, of the man that could marry a woman with as devious a mind as Mrs Weasley. The entire feeling was one so out of place in comparison to the easy-going, simple man he had just spent a pleasant time talking to that Harry found himself rapidly reconsidering the entire conversation. He suddenly realised Mr Weasley’s earlier protestation of losing in a wand fight to Harry was probably quite unrealistic. Harry instead found himself wondering just who might come out on top of a little friendly confrontation.

Harry guessed that Mr Weasley must be a lot of fun when at home. You probably never knew who might show up when he walked into the room, and Harry thought that would keep life interesting. “I was called up here and just asked some questions about my dealings with

vampires. I don't remember the name of the fellow as did the questioning, though."

With a laugh, Mr Weasley stepped into the flames and vanished with a cry of, "Ministry of Magic, Atrium!"

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Mon, 11 Sep 1995, 8:23 am

Harry arrived at the target greenhouse by broom, narrowly avoiding the suit of armour that had almost caught up to him outside the Headmaster's office corridor. Harry knew he had a slight dose of paranoia, but the whole thing made him wonder just how enchanted the magical armour was that it would hunt down students that offended it and promise to deliver chastisement. The more curious question was how it actually tracked down a particular student.

Neville was poking about the base of some spiky, dark-red plant that would occasionally try to snag him with a tendril of vicious barbs. Neville, unaware that Harry had arrived, was talking in a way a parent might to a young child. "Stop that, Nessler!" Giving the offending tendril a loving tap with a hand trowel, Neville ignored it as he continued to apply some fertiliser to the base.

"You actually name the plants, then?" Harry asked, somewhat amused.

Neville carefully stepped out of reach of the plant before turning to Harry with a frown. "Why not? They clearly have their own minds. You'd name a pet, wouldn't you?"

Harry shrugged absently, his smile not fading a whit. "Not saying it was right or wrong, Neville. Just surprised, that's all."

Neville smiled back in a lopsided manner, acknowledging the point. "I thought we'd skip up a bit today, Harry, and work on the Venomous Tentacula. This one that I named Nessler is in need of some care."

Harry dropped his bags and donned his protective gear, curious as to why it was called the Venomous Tentacula, as opposed to just a Tentacula. Given the general trend for magical creatures to be either incredibly cute, fluffy, and harmless, or else not so cute, not so fluffy, and very lethal, it seemed likely that plants could be similarly classified. This one appeared destined to be in the latter category.

“Right, then. How many minutes before I die if it successfully gets some of those hooks into me?”

Neville laughed at Harry’s question, shaking his head slightly. “Really, Harry. You’re way too paranoid. You’ll have plenty of time to walk up to the hospital wing, and maybe even have some lunch, before you need to start getting worried.”

Harry stood next to Neville, watching the plant twitch and strain to reach them. “Well, evolutionarily, that doesn’t make much sense. It wants its victims to die quickly if it needs their nutrients.”

Neville shook his head briefly. “You’ve got it the wrong way round, Harry. If one of the spikes gets in you, it stays in and the poison will slowly kill you. You’ve got time to move off to some other location before you collapse. As your body breaks down, the spike will blossom into a new plant. Very efficient, and if the bodies were all piled up at the base of this plant, then there would be too much competition for food. Not to mention that it would discourage other creatures from getting close.”

Harry watched some of the tendrils dance about in the air for a moment. “You know, Neville, that explanation doesn’t really make me feel better. Dead is dead, you know?”

As Harry began tending to the plant, moving about as Neville directed, he found it amusing to notice Neville batting the plant away from Harry until he became used to how it moved. Once Neville apparently felt comfortable that Harry could look after himself, he stepped back and let Harry work while keeping up a discussion of the care and growth cycle of the plant.

Harry actually found it odd that he never felt the constant need to be aware of who was near him when he knew it was just he and Neville in the greenhouse. Even when he was only in the presence of Cyril or Edgar, he always kept himself aware and on edge, ready for conflict or some kind of instant action. Talking to Neville was somehow calming, as though his new friend actually radiated a tangible pacifism and peace to others.

At one point when their conversation hit a natural lull, Harry decided to ask about something he had noticed the prior week. "Neville, feel free to tell me to bugger off, but I was curious what's happened between you and Hannah? I thought you were an item when I met you all on the train."

Neville was silent long enough that Harry stepped away from the reach of the plant in order to safely look at him. Harry thought Neville's expression was one of determination yet sorrow, tinged with a hint of relief. "It's hard to explain, I reckon," Neville said at last. "For some reason, she made a judgment about you and wouldn't hear otherwise."

Neville moved over to the nearby bench. "We were together for a while, sure, but after she made up her mind... I don't know how to say it, but I don't feel so bad about it now. I'm kind of glad I learned that she isn't very tolerant now, rather than later, you know?"

Harry smiled wryly. "Well, not really. I can't honestly say I've ever had a successful relationship, so you're the expert here twice over."

Neville looked at Harry in clear surprise. "Really?"

Shrugging, Harry sat next to Neville. "Look, I live in the Muggle world. I can't exactly tell a girlfriend about what I do, I can't bring one home, and I can't spend copious time with her or her friends whenever they want me to. That's just not in my cards. I train whenever I do have free time, I can't talk about the books I read with a Muggle since what I read she can't learn... I had a couple of potential girlfriends, neither lasted more than a week. The funny thing is they both thought I was playing with them, seeing someone else at the same time since I couldn't explain all the weirdness."

Neville shook his head slowly. "Never thought about it," he offered quietly. "Makes sense, though. Before Hannah, I dated Susan Bones briefly, but we decided we were better off as friends. Oh, well. Harry, now that you're here, you're around girls that you can talk to, right?"

Harry had to snort at that. "Oh, sure. 'Hi, I know you're terrified of me, the new Dark lord and all, but what say we go spend some time alone together and get to know each other? I promise not to carve out your heart for my nefarious purposes until after I've had my way with you.' You'd think they would just line up for that, right?"

Neville was laughing openly by the time Harry finished. "Maybe you should try to be nicer, Harry. You seem to enjoy cultivating an attitude of uncaring indifference and violence."

Harry chuckled in turn. "Keeps the sheep at bay, Neville."

Neville made a humming noise as he studied some of the plants in the greenhouse. "Doesn't seem to be stopping Ginny, though, from what I can see."

Harry stopped smiling and sighed. "It's not like that, Neville. Er, look, I don't want to make you uncomfortable or anything, right? But I can tell you used to have a major crush on her. I don't know what happened, if anything, and it's not my business. But Ginny wants me to teach her how to fight, and I finally agreed. That means she has to spend time with me, sure, but it mostly means she has no idea what she's got herself into. We're barely friends, nothing more. I do hope she and I will become better friends, though, and that's part of why I agreed to help her. I really don't have time or the inclination for more, regardless of who it's with."

Neville remained quiet for a long time and studied his shoes. "I suppose everyone can see that, Harry. You're right, though, I still do like her, though not really like that anymore. It's more like... like..."

Harry clapped Neville on the back for a second. "Like she was the first girl you convinced yourself you were in love with, and you'll always think of her in a special way. I understand. There was this girl



Amy that I knew once, but she didn't feel about me as I did about her, or maybe I just bollixed it all up when I talked to her. That's just life, I guess."

Neville shared a weak smile with Harry. Checking his watch, Neville stood up and brushed his gear off. "I think we ought to stop for now, Harry. It's only about ten minutes to class, and we need to switch greenhouses. We haven't really got time to do more today. Let's clean up and head over, right?"

Accepting the desire for no more conversation, Harry helped Neville pack away the tools and extra materials. Grabbing his bag and broom, he followed Neville toward the greenhouse doors.

"Hey, Neville?" Harry stopped his friend. Neville paused to look at him in silent patience. "What keeps these greenhouses from getting too hot? The Muggles use all kinds of machines to keep the temperature stable."

Neville looked surprised for a second as he reached out and tapped the slightly frosted glass door. "Temperature Regulation Glass," he said quietly. "They're set to 25.5 degrees. If it gets a little too warm inside, then the glass cools down which, in turn, cools off the air. If the air is too cold, then the panes heat up a bit."

Harry paused to apply this setup to his knowledge of how magic worked. It sounded as though there were three spells cast on the glass: a Temperature-Sensing Charm, a Cooling Charm, and a Heating Charm. Some kind of ward-like control structure would bind them all together, activating either the heating or cooling spell when the temperature was outside of some small hysteresis window, and the collection of spells themselves would be powered from the ward-control's buffer. Looking closely, Harry could see that there was some pattern to the soft aura glowing on each bit of glass. He had always assumed he was just seeing the plants inside or the castle in the distance.

"Every pane, Neville?"

Neville nodded his head, as he opened the door. “Yeah, it’s pretty neat. We’re supposed to learn how to do those late in N.E.W.T. Charms, and they’re dead useful for homes. The advantage in the greenhouse, though, is that you don’t have to worry about snow build-up on the roof.”

Harry nodded his appreciation as he moved to follow Neville through the door. However, he was unable to stop the person running pell-mell toward the greenhouse from crashing into Neville just as the boy stepped through the doorway. Neville went down in a bundle of arms and legs with the interloper, as Harry stepped back and unconsciously had a wand in hand, prepared to hex first and question later.

It took a second for Harry to register that it was a girl with long black hair, crying uncontrollably, and that she had apparently latched onto Neville and was holding him tightly enough that even the calm and reserved Neville was looking quite alarmed. Curious, Harry bent down and picked up the Daily Prophet that had been dropped in the impact, noting the main story on the Social Life page that the paper was open to.

Life As Triwizard Champion

A Cedric Diggory Exclusive!

by Rita Skeeter

Harry skimmed the article and found out that Cedric had recently broken up with ‘school date’ Cho Chang. Harry vaguely recalled that Cho was the friendly and pretty Asian girl with long black hair that he had met on the train. They had passed each other several times since then, but she was somewhat cool and far more distant than she had been on the train. Hermione had mentioned after one of those encounters that Cho was dating Cedric, but it was obvious that Cedric was now apparently seeing – with complete pictorial spread of various candid shots of two people clearly being affectionate with each other – someone new. Looking down at the figure clutching Neville, Harry stepped closer and saw that it was, in fact, Cho Chang who was sobbing into Neville’s chest.

“Er, Cho?” Harry tried tentatively. Getting no reaction, Harry just held up the paper and let Neville see the headline and photos. His friend’s eyes widened for a moment before he sighed and apparently reached the same conclusion that Harry had. Harry reached down to offer a hand up, but Neville shook his head and motioned for Harry to go on to class and that he would follow later.

Nodding his acceptance, Harry took his bag, broom, and the Daily Prophet and strolled over to the greenhouse where his class would be meeting. As he thumbed through the paper, Harry was both unsurprised and surprised to find no mention of the Malfoy debacle. He was curious what news he would receive at home tonight, between Edgar and the others. Surely Malfoy was not getting away with his stunt, given the hint from Edgar’s letter the prior evening.

The whys and wherefores of coming to Hogwarts with Polyjuiced impersonators would be an interesting bit for the Aurors to explore. The fact that it broke several laws that Harry could think of offhand suggested that Lucius had taken a gamble and was going to suffer personally for a change. Of course, the next question would be where Draco was if someone else was parading around as the Malfoy heir at Hogwarts.

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Mon, 11 Sep 1995, 9:02 am

“Where’s Neville?” Ginny dropped her bag and broom off next to Harry’s as she joined him at the table. “I thought he would be with you.” Harry silently watched her scan the greenhouse before she looked expectantly at him. Hermione waved as she moved to the table across from them, Ron trailing in her wake and ostensibly refusing to make eye contact.

“He ran into a problem and said he’d be a few minutes late,” Harry offered with as much nonchalance as he could. Somehow, it seemed unlikely that Cho would appreciate Harry telling others where she was

or what state she was in. By keeping his tone bland and uninteresting, he knew that it would evoke no inquisition from others.

“Oh.” Somehow, Ginny seemed faintly disappointed with his answer. “Well,” she said, smiling brightly again, “did you have a good tutoring session?”

Something about the way she was asking the question left Harry wondering what the redhead was up to. “Rather typical, I suppose.”

She nodded politely, her eyes obviously running over his clothes and protective gear. “Well, I’m glad you had a nice time, then.”

At this point, Harry knew something was very wrong. He recognised that Ginny had radical mood swings for reasons that were not clear to his male brain, and he knew that he had experienced her vengeful mode, her stubborn mode, and her banter mode. This mode, some kind of polite and overly sweet concern, rang incredibly false with him. He noted in passing that her hair was up, pulled back out of her face and securely tied. It was not in the plait which seemed to be her hallmark for pranking, but it still left him vaguely suspicious.

Harry decided it was time to turn the tables. He was curious to find out what she did before coming here, so he adopted his best winning smile and cheery voice, “And you, my dear Ginny, how was your time spent before class this lovely morn?”

If anything, Ginny’s smile became broader, but her answer was cut off as Professor Sprout called the class to order. All he received for his query was the exaggerated smile and a wink.

As Professor Sprout began to lecture about self-fertilising shrubberies, Neville quietly slipped in and joined them at their table. Sprout saw him slip in but made no comment of it, except for her frown of displeasure at the company Neville was keeping.

Ginny shot Neville a glance that asked a clear question, to which Neville just shook his head and mouthed ‘later’ before he looked at Harry and shrugged. Harry noticed the wet spot all down the front of

Neville's protective gear as the boy pulled out parchment and began making notes on the professor's lesson.

When it came time to switch to the practical aspects after nearly forty minutes of lecture, the three of them moved off under Ginny's direction to the most secluded shrub of the bunch. "All right, what's going on?" she hissed.

Neville shot Harry a look, to which he just shook his head, hoping Neville would understand that meant he had said nothing of events just before class. "Um, did you read the Prophet this morning, Ginny?" Neville slowly asked.

Ginny nodded with obvious impatience as she laid out the tools they needed. Harry prepared the new basin for the shrubbery to be moved into, while Neville glanced around to apparently make sure they were not being overheard. "You saw the article on Cedric?"

Again Ginny nodded, but now she was watching Neville with an expectant look. "Well, Cho ran into us, and she was, uh, upset. According to her, Cedric only broke up with her a few days ago through a letter. I think either he was trying to be nice about it, or maybe she was just reading more into it than he really said, but she thought it wasn't so much a break-up as a take-some-time thing. Either way, well..."

As Neville trailed off to silence, Ginny frowned sharply. "Let me guess," she said with anger in her voice. "Her housemates have been teasing her, too."

Neville nodded slowly.

Ginny just sighed and began digging around in the base of the shrub. Harry exchanged glances with Neville, somewhat baffled at the response. "And I thought only some females were confusing," he muttered.

Ginny promptly smashed his foot with a hand rake, causing Harry to chuckle as she discovered the magic of steel-toed boots. Ignoring the glare she was giving him, Harry just smirked at her.

“Her housemates also tease Luna and take Luna’s things,” she spat out. “They may be smart, but they aren’t very nice people at all. I’d like to hex the lot of them.”

The three of them worked together in silence after that, although Harry spent some time trying to decide if he really wanted to talk to the odd Ravenclaw girl again. He knew he would invariably cross paths with her, which was a source of both dread and mild anticipation. Making a note to obtain a jar of marmalade and some saltines to carry in his bag, he decided he would just let that development follow the natural course of events.

Ginny, however, kept casting furtive glances at Neville, leaving Harry curious about what else was going on that he was unaware of.

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Mon, 11 Sep 1995, 11:06 am

Harry followed Ginny around the side of Hagrid’s cabin, although this time she was making a beeline for the edge of the forest. Harry saw that a large crate had been set up there. At nearly twenty feet on a side and about ten feet tall, it looked large enough to be a comfortable studio apartment on the inside, except for the minor detail that it was shaking periodically. To make things even more interesting, no sounds were coming out of it despite the noises the frame alone should have been making in protest.

“So,” he offered as they gradually got closer to the crate, “what are studying today, oh wise tutor?”

Ginny paused to smile in that strange sweet manner before she beckoned him to walk beside her. “Oh, I thought we might take a break from the simple creatures, Harry. You know, spice up things a bit.”

“Right.” Harry continued to eye the crate that was still shaking in random directions. It was impressive what magic could do to an

object in order to strengthen it and make it nearly indestructible. "I'm sure this should be fun. Is that just one critter in there, or what?"

Ginny patted his hand in a flagrantly patronising manner. "Now, Harry, really. Norman's not so bad. After all, I worked with him all of last year. Hagrid and I were just putting him in here before last class so you could get to meet him. I think Norman's just wanting to go for a walk. He usually roams about in the Forest these days."

Somehow, the idea that whatever was in that crate needed so much space, shook it like a cube of gelatine, and was perfectly safe roaming through the Forbidden Forest left Harry feeling reassured that it would obviously be the cute, fluffy, and harmless variety of magical creature.

"Norman and his siblings were some of the first creatures Hagrid ever bred himself, but don't tell anyone else that. He really wasn't supposed to try." The fact that Hagrid, whose idea of what was harmless was infamously dubious, had actually bred Norman failed to comfort Harry at all.

Harry became even more paranoid, if that was possible, when Ginny moved to take his bag and broom from him, forcing him to consider just how much he trusted the redhead. She clearly needed him to be around to train her, so whatever he was about to face was unlikely to be instantly lethal. At the same time, he had yet to meet a magical creature that he was unable to handle, barring dragons, and that crate was far too small and inflammable for a dragon to be lurking inside. Harry relinquished his possessions with a suddenly jaunty smile, and Ginny took them and placed them securely behind the crate. Using her own broom, she flew up to the top of the shaking crate and reached out with her wand. She paused there for a second before looking back at Harry.

"Just take Norman for a walk, Harry, and he'll love you."

With a winsome smile, she tapped the top of the crate. There was a sharp report of several locks releasing, and suddenly the entire front vanished as though it was never there. Inside, Harry was curious to

see, was a giant, twelve-foot long grey thing. It had no clearly defined head, two tremendous claws, what looked to be armour plating, with an over-sized stinger like a scorpion over its back. The multitude of legs scuttled the body around so that Harry was approximately facing the stinger, with the claws mere yards from him.

“What is it?” Harry asked the redhead who had stayed on top of the crate, his smile unconsciously slipping a bit as both wands almost leapt into his hands.

Anything else he might be tempted to ask was cut off as the creature shot out an enormous bolt of magical energy and literally flew through the air toward him.

Her simultaneous, cheerful answer gave him no information he could use as his own sense of mortality suddenly and violently reasserted itself.

“Norman’s a Blast-Ended Skrewt, Harry!”

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A/N:

You may have recognized a line from the Welsh poet Dylan Marlais Thomas in this chapter. You may also have recognised a name that was originally created by Sandra Boynton, of her own author fame – in particular, from “Snoozers.”

The mechanics of greenhouse temperature regulation is a side-effect of a query Parakletos made to me. Thanks to Parakletos for asking an interesting question. The advantage to having all the rules of magic worked out is that it’s easy to model just about anything and not be inconsistent.

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to cwarbeck and Chreechree. Thanks to Reg and random others for their aid with Brit-



picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

## Chapter 22: ...And Turns

...

Even though studies demonstrate that extensive magical training can increase the amount of energy that an individual conduit can channel, there are limits to the possible amount of change. The upper limits are partially due to the particulars of a given species' anatomy when in good health, or, more specifically, the ability to handle the peak rate of heat exchange. Other limitations are neither tied to the physical form of the entity using magic, nor are the limitations well understood. Those species that should be capable of handling extreme heat cannot alter any conduit's size beyond a narrow window. The boundary conditions on the conduit capacity parameter appear to be species-centric, although the exact mechanisms and causality remain unknown.

Conduits, in general, perform like other artefacts of the body and self-repair if injured, adjust to physical changes such as growth and puberty, and operate with an efficiency proportional to the health of the user. It is important to understand that individual conduits come in either input or output varieties, with output conduits representing the vast majority of all conduits present. While similar in nature, the actual connections involved between the output or input conduits are quite different. Output conduits, as previously discussed, drain specific types of fundamental energy particles from the magical core, releasing the energy primarily at the top of the epidermal layer. Similarly, input conduits adsorb specific types of surfeit magical energy particles, primarily from the top of the epidermal layer, and channel it back either into the magical core or to the dura mater surface, the latter making an extra sensory input to the central nervous system.

This so-called sixth sense is even present in lesser creatures that cannot directly use magic, although they are more prone to ignoring the stimulus itself at a conscious level. For the various magic-using species, such extrasensory input conduits are critical for self-regulation and feedback, much as the hand senses heat to avoid touching a fire. Without this feedback loop, it is speculated that conduits would drain the magical core too quickly, causing either

immediate damage or more complex problems from the heat by-product.

It is important to note, however, that just as some forms of trauma are non-reparable to the body, conduits are also constrained by how much damage they can naturally or, with medical intervention, artificially overcome. It is well documented that excessive burning of the epidermal layer will destroy conduit micro-openings along with nerve endings, reducing whatever natural talent for magic use resided in the affected area. Other forms of severe trauma have been documented to yield different results depending on the form of trauma and location of injury.

If the body cannot sufficiently compensate for an excessive heat build up, any conduits exceeding their cooling capacity will literally burn out. There is no known cure for such a burn out. Destroyed conduits cannot be recovered through any amount of time or known medical techniques. The ultimate risk from repeated burn-out is what the Muggles term spontaneous self-combustion, or the eventual overload of a magical core that has reached peak capacity but can no longer drain energy through conduits even when the host is unaware of it. Denied any outlet, the magical core, which continues to charge, essentially breaks its containment, and the sudden effusion of high-energy particles throughout the body causes self-immolation to occur in less than one second based on recorded evidence.

Any device, magical or otherwise, which blocks all conduits is ultimately fatal if not removed. For most life forms, the magical core recharge rate ensures death within two to four weeks, dependant upon proximity to flux lines and ambient magical energy sources, as well as individual recharge rates. Whether the propensity for burn-out is a risk factor for other species is not known at this time.

The central mechanism to trigger a release of magical particles from the core and through the conduits is based upon...

... Excerpt from Theory of Magic, Volume I, Section I, edited by R.J.L.

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Mon, 11 Sep 1995, 11:57 am

“Harry?”

Her voice was tantalizingly close, but he would be hard pressed to care at this point.

Harry felt that breathing deeply, looking up at the sky, and laying perfectly still on his back as though he had just fallen to the earth were far more important than acknowledging the redhead suddenly blocking his view of the grey skies.

“Harry?” She sounded tentative and uncertain, which to his mind was a good thing. When he frowned at her, however, her smile mocked him with its brightness.

“It’s nice to see you’re all right after all. You could at least answer me when I talk to you, Harry.”

Somehow, Harry lacked the energy for outrage or even irritation at her accusatory tone.

Drawing a deep breath, Harry let it out slowly while letting the breeze cool the sweat dampening his hair and robes. “Norman, eh?” He was pleased to note that his voice was calm, despite his urge to shake the girl standing over him like some kind of Lady over her servant. That would require movement, and presently that was the last thing he wanted to do.

“Well, I would have called him George, but that would just be confusing.” Ginny seemed to wave the whole notion off as though it were perfectly obvious as she examined her wand casually. “I have to admit, though, I’ve seen all kinds of great flying tricks, but I’ve never seen anyone fly so well without a broom.”

Harry grunted, still not prepared to get up. He wanted to continue lying there, letting his weary body relax, and to ignore the bruises he knew were forming under his clothes. “You should try it sometime.”

Ginny nodded her head slowly. "It did look like fun, but you were using non-verbal magic, so I wouldn't know how to do it."

Harry was unable to stop the groan from escaping as he sat up. He would definitely be suffering from a closer relationship with Newton's Laws than he would have wished for over the next few days, unless he could somehow convince Madam Pomfrey to treat him without confining him again. "I thought you were paying attention in Charms last week."

Ginny's brow furrowed for a moment as she tried to connect the conversation to said lesson, and then her eyes flashed briefly. "You were using Summoning and Banishing Charms?"

Harry nodded slowly. "You focus them on the ground and apply more force. The only problem is that pesky Mr Newton and his so-called laws." With a jerking lurch, Harry clambered to his feet, hissing a bit as his ribs and arms protested mightily. "I think I'll be seeing Madam Pomfrey later."

"You know, Harry, I was ready to step in and calm Norman down. You didn't have to fight with him." Ginny sounded completely unapologetic, but Harry was already making the connections between the Venomous Tentacula and the Skrewt.

Giving her a once-over, Harry still felt mildly disgusted that she had so readily handled the Skrewt. She had not even dishevelled her robes, which were as pristine as ever if a bit worn in places. "I don't suppose you could tell me how you did that, could you?" On the one hand, Harry had to hand it to her that her opening salvo on their little bet had been quite thorough. On the other hand, he was horribly curious to know how she had managed to calm that thing down so easily.

Harry had been firing a mix of Banishing and Summoning charms to keep himself literally flying through the air to avoid the overtly friendly Skrewt, shooting off curses, hexes and any distractors that might work as often as he could in between the jarring laws of physics being applied to his body. The Skrewt seemed to propel itself using some variant of the Banishing and Summoning charms instinctively,

as it too would literally fly from one spot to another. It lacked the control that Harry was able to exert over his own flight, but to see a twelve-foot-long, several-hundred-weight thing flying through the air at you with giant mandibles and pincers ready to tear you into little pieces was somewhat unnerving. It almost was enough to make the poisonous stinger a mere nuisance.

Harry had finally managed to pin the creature back into the crate it came out of, but he was losing the battle to keep it in there as it could break the spells he put up around it faster than he could cast them. The Skrewt's armour was on par with dragon-hide at resisting magical damage. Right before the monster could free itself again, Ginny had flown down and landed in front of the brute. Calmly stepping around every outstretched lethal appendage reaching for her, she laid one hand on the strange smooth nub where it should have had a head.

Almost immediately, it stopped thrashing about, no longer trying to tear the girl to pieces. It also ceased attempting to escape the crate. After a moment or two of evidently soothing Norman, she had stepped back and casually let it scuttle off into the forest. Harry had seen both of their auras fluctuate as soon as she made contact, but beyond that, he had no idea what had happened. As soon as the Skrewt made it into the forest, Harry had expediently collapsed and enjoyed the relative calm that had followed.

Ginny smiled at him for a moment. "That would be telling, right?"

"Very clever, using my own words against me." Harry sighed as he somewhat peevishly took his bag and broom from the witch. "Food, then medical intervention."

Ginny just patted his shoulder very lightly. "Poor Harry, was Norman too much for you to handle?"

Glowering at her, Harry shook a finger in her face. "From what I can tell, I have to actually work with the creatures, keeping them alive and healthy. Without those pesky restrictions, I would've handled Norman just fine."

Harry pulled his broom under his legs and began gingerly flying back towards the castle as Ginny flew alongside him on her own broom. "Imagine that: Harry Potter, done in by his own cleverness."

Harry shrugged absently, wincing only slightly at the sensations it induced. "Won't be the last time, either, I'm sure."

"I'm quite sure of it," she replied with a grin. "But you learned something about Skrewts, didn't you?"

"Learned is such a delicate term. I'd suggest they are large, unattractive, combative, have some nasty natural magic, and don't like to take 'no' for an answer from their prospective meals."

Ginny flashed him a bright smile. "Congratulations. Now you know as much about them as anyone else does."

In the distance, Harry could see a post owl flying towards the castle, which was atypical as it was well past normal post owl time. By the time they reached the front steps, they could see a large barn owl perched on a railing, carrying what appeared to be a standard letter. Harry paused at the entrance to the castle, holding the door open so the owl could fly in, but instead it dropped onto the ground in front of Ginny.

With a fluid motion, Ginny untied the letter, and the owl immediately took off towards the Owlery tower. Harry watched her glance at the note before handing it to him with a clear question in her expression. Harry scanned it while she continued to regard him with that questioning look on her face.

Ginny –

Ask Harry to get a book for you from his aufero scrinium. He'll explain what the book is for. Please tell Harry, "FM and working dinner."  
Thanks.

– Remus

“Right,” Harry sighed for a moment. “Don’t meander too far. I’ll be right back.” Without saying anything else, he left the redhead behind as he flew off to his bedroom window by skirting around the outside of the castle.

After moving through the multi-faceted defences and charms he had placed in careful layers around his bedroom window, his attention turned to the trunk at the foot of his bed. Deactivating the locks and protections on his trunk, he pulled out his Transporter Box and set it on the bed. The slate grey box was far heavier than normal, even when considering the stone construction. Flipping it open, Harry had to suppress a chuckle as he spied the oversized volume within. Dropping the book onto the bed, he stowed the Transporter Box back in his trunk, reactivating all the protections before flying back down to where the redhead was pacing back and forth, obviously impatient and waiting for him.

When he landed, he tossed the book towards her, smiling slightly as her eyes widened as she bobbled the heavy book when it landed in her arms. While it had been awkward to carry, he had managed the entire trip without aggravating his self-inflicted damage from playing footsie with the Skrewt. Opening one of the doors leading inside, Harry motioned with his left hand for Ginny to precede him, while he absently scanned inside the entrance hall to see who was around.

When she failed to walk in, Harry glanced over to see a puzzled Ginny holding the thick book, the pages obviously well-aged and the cover worn in many places.

“Harry?” Ginny was obviously baffled by the book, as she stood there on the steps watching him. The cover proclaimed the truly exciting contents of the gift, *Albion Casuistry and Precedent*, by Anne A. Ling.

Harry, for his part, was trying not to laugh at how well Remus had passed off the responsibility for this onto him. “You talked to him about learning Occlumency, right?”

Ginny nodded.



“Did he tell you about how it works?”

“Well,” she offered after a second, “it’s protecting your mind from an outside attack. You focus on specific thoughts, and then use your willpower to keep them at the front of your mind.”

Harry made a see-sawing motion with his hand. “Close enough for now. Remus will cover the details, but he’s going to start by teaching you to do what we call Level One Shielding. That’s where you focus tightly on just one memory, to the exclusion of everything else. Something your attacker doesn’t care about, ideally. It’s the key to building walls around your mind, and then it comes down to your willpower and magic versus the attacker’s. But you’ll learn about this with Remus, right?”

Harry motioned for her to follow him as he slowly walked into the Great Hall, heading for the empty seats by Fred and George. “The problem is that you have to focus all the time on that one memory. That’s rather tiring, and being unable to think of anything else is pretty much detrimental to doing anything at all. So what really happens is that a Level One Occlumens has no shields until they realise they are being attacked, at which point they focus intently on some image. The question is what your opponent will find during the interval between the start of the attack and when you can get your own mind back under your control.”

“Okay, that makes sense.” Ginny was nodding as she walked along with him, matching his somewhat slower than normal pace.

“Well, the mind isn’t like a book, Ginny. You don’t just thumb through it. It’s like a sphere sitting in space, and at the centre of it are all your active memories. It’s the focal point of any attack or defence. If you can control the centre, you can reach out and grab almost anything.” Harry absently rubbed at his hip, which was bothering him faintly from his unplanned training exercise. “For what you need to do, or rather to learn, the trick is to make the sphere larger, so large that you’ll have plenty of time to react to any intrusion. In order to do that, you need more spurious thoughts floating around. The more thoughts,

and the more interconnected those thoughts are, the bigger the sphere that has to be punched through by your assailant.”

Reaching the multiple empty seats across from the twins, Harry gratefully sank into one and let the pleasure of being motionless work on his body. The twins were watching them closely with gimlet eyes, but Harry ignored them to finish the brief lesson. “So what kind of thoughts are the hardest to deal with when you want to sneak a peek into someone’s mind and find out something juicy? What kind of thoughts can trigger huge chains of related thoughts that never have sensitive information? It’s pretty hard to beat legal treatise phrasing with regard to material that is obtuse, archaic, convoluted, irritating, distracting, and thoroughly tied together. So, Ginny, you get to memorise that book. It’s the first of many, actually.”

Ginny was suddenly staring at him in horror, while Fred and George were agape as they registered the title of the book. “You’re not serious?” Her voice was hushed, and she clearly was hoping this was some elaborate joke.

“Quite. You wouldn’t believe the amazing details you can find if you just dig around in those books.” Harry pulled some kind of roast beef platter closer, intent on eating quickly before some annoying professor came along to disrupt his meal entirely.

“Memorise?” Ginny had now transferred her horrified look from Harry to the book in front of her.

“Well, you’ll try to. You won’t succeed, of course, but you’ll still be tested on it. After a while, you’ll get a feel for the things you want to memorise, but that first book is mostly just amusing. Cows, property lines, dividing bones, that sort of thing. But all those details will be in your head, floating around the edges, irritating the hell out of anyone that tries to read your mind.”

Ginny looked at Harry closely, clearly unhappy. “Remus said I had to make it to Level Three before I’d be considered reasonably safe. What’s that mean?”

Harry gave her a vague smile, knowing it had to annoy her as much as his mentors' similar smiles rankled him. "You'll find out."

Harry went back to piling food on his plate until Fred cleared his throat loudly. "Harry, you might want to do your disappearing trick again, and right about now would be good."

"Oh?" Harry sat up a bit and glanced around before he spotted Umbridge making a beeline for him, a scroll held tightly in one dumpy fist. "Oh. Bugger that, I'm hungry."

Ignoring the approaching harbinger, Harry concentrated on getting all the decent foods in overly large portions onto his plate. If he had to make a run for it, he would at least take his lunch with him.

"Mr Potter." Umbridge was no longer shouting, but her voice was ostentatiously loud and irritating no matter how demure she pretended to be. "I've been looking for you, and I'm so glad to have finally caught you."

"Yes, Madam Dark?" Harry ignored her condescending attitude as he quickly poured a goblet of pumpkin juice, hoping that it would be pleasantly bitter to counter the dangerously honeyed tones from the woman behind him.

"I have here the full copy of that trifling thing you were asking after – the Wizengamot Decree."

Harry found the scroll she had been holding thrust under his nose, while the woman was giving him a self-satisfied smile. In passing, he thought that her smile made her face appear even more repugnant and that her perfume reminded him strongly of the fetid fumes from the spray of a *Mephitis mephitis*. He ignored his revulsion as he unravelled the roll of parchment the purulent hag had forced upon him. Harry also became aware of the fact that Professor McGonagall had approached to within hearing distance, most likely to see how events would unfold.

Ignoring the random Party of the first part, powers vested by, whereas much, and similar standard clauses, Harry hit the highlights in rapid succession. "Well, look at that. The post of Hogwarts High Inquisitor really was created. That's exciting. It says the High Inquisitor has the right to ask anyone any question. Spivvy."

Setting the scroll aside, Harry proceeded to ignore both the parchment and Umbridge as he began cutting up his roast beef.

Umbridge had that same gloating smile on her face as she turned her beady eyes on him. "I'm so glad that you have finally recognised my authority, Mr Potter." Harry felt that her feigned civility was about as effective as a vampire protesting to a victim that it was 'only one little sip.' "Now, then, I want to know what happened to put the Headmaster in the hospital wing, Mr Potter."

Glancing up, he gave her a flat stare. "That's nice. We should all have wants in life. It gives us something to strive for, yet lets us realise what we already have."

Umbridge took a small step back to form, puffing up slightly and turning faintly red in the face as she shook a finger at him. "I am asking you to tell me what happened, Mr Potter. Are you refusing to answer me?"

"Obviously."

"You can't do that." Her voice dropped to a venomous whisper.

"Really?" Harry picked up the scroll and waved it at her as though she were being particularly naughty. "Would you like for me to tell you why I can? First, this has yet to be posted for a period of not less than seven full days in public places, including those institutions funded by the Ministry. Second, this document conveys the position of High Inquisitor upon the Minister of Magic and makes no provision for delegation of that authority. Third, this document says that the High Inquisitor, who does not legally exist yet, is entitled to ask questions, but it does not say that the Inquisitor is entitled to answers. The only power conferred is the power to ask questions of anyone under the

jurisdiction of the Albion Wizengamot, which brings us to the fourth point – I am not under the jurisdiction of the Albion Wizengamot. So even if you had the powers you think you do, which you do not, I still wouldn't have to answer you."

Any pretence of self-discipline was abruptly thrown out the window as Umbridge's eyes bulged and her face darkened fully. Her jaw worked for a moment as she registered everything Harry had just stated. "That's sophistry!"

Harry was almost positive that Umbridge could not produce a shriller whine if she practised late into the night. He shook his head. "No, Dark Madam, it isn't. It's the law. This is the decree, those are the words, and that is all that can be enforced. If you don't like it, well, procure yourself a new decree."

"But Cornelius is out of the country until Sunday!"

Harry went for the vague smile again. "I'm sure he's having a splendid time of it, too. Maybe he'll take an extra week from his busy and challenging life here, eh?"

McGonagall's precise, clipped tones cut across their conversation. "Is there a problem here, Dolores? Mr Potter?"

Harry gave a carefully neutral glance to the Deputy Headmistress. "No, Professor," he said in an excruciatingly polite tone. "Professor Arts here was just leaving so I could eat my lunch before class."

"I see." McGonagall kept her eyes on Harry for a split-second before turning her gaze to Umbridge. "Are you planning on having lunch today, Professor?" The very slight emphasis on the title conveyed to everyone that she was perfectly well aware of the exchange between Harry and Umbridge.

With a malevolent glower, Umbridge stalked off to the Head Table for lunch, leaving Harry in peace.

“Harry?” Ginny’s voice caused him to turn and look at her again. “I’ll know how to argue like that when I’m done with these books, right?”

Harry shrugged. “Depends on how well you study the material.”

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Mon, 11 Sep 1995, 12:44 pm

Harry could hear Cyril arguing with a woman whose voice he failed to recognise, both of them in the back of the infirmary. The curtains around Cyril’s bed were firmly drawn shut, however, so he had no idea what exactly was going on. While the precise words were unintelligible, Harry had been on bed rest for medical purposes often enough to understand that his Mentor’s words were more about unwanted restrictions than about being in medical care.

Madam Pomfrey, surprisingly, had given Harry a potion and a bit of wand work to repair his bruising problems without any comment. She had raised an eyebrow at his reappearance but motioned him to be quiet as she gestured towards the curtains hiding the argument currently taking place. Harry tried to ignore the wicked grin covering her face, rationalising that anything that could make the matron smile like that was something that Harry desired no knowledge of in this lifetime.

“Mr Potter,” she whispered after she had finished. “I’m glad you had the sense to come and see me now. If you had waited until tonight for treatment, you would be spending the evening with me again. Oh, your Mentor asked me to get this to you before two o’clock. Now, be off with you.”

Harry walked in mild bemusement towards the staircase so he could proceed outside to the castle grounds. The mediwitch’s face had been alight as she moved back towards Cyril’s section of the infirmary, indirectly causing Harry to bolt from the place.

He had left the lunch table in a hurry as soon as he had finished eating, noticing the hostile glances still coming from Umbridge. Dean

Thomas had waylaid Ginny for some matter, and the twins had got into a Quidditch team argument with other broom-wielding Gryffindors, so his escape had been easy to attain. Curiously, he had noticed that Neville, Hermione, and her tag-along Ron had not been at lunch, but that at least gave him the chance to not be grilled for an hour or so.

As he walked back from his little sojourn to the Infirmary, Harry flipped open the note to read Cyril's request. Invariably, it would be something innocent-sounding that would involve another clash with the multiple groups out to get him, but that, at least, managed to keep life interesting.

Harry –

Cease DADA classes, the temptation is simply too great. Today, come to the infirmary during that time. Thereafter, pursue Vencil's instructions.

– C.F.

Harry wanted to chuckle at the thought that he would crack again and leave the Defence instructor defenceless and disabled in her own classroom. Pulling him from the class, however, would have the added benefit that he would have zero direct interaction with the woman and would further remove him from her soon-to-be-growing sphere of influence. Perhaps the best part was that by leaving her class, he would irritate the woman even further, and she would have to work so much harder to find a pretext to talk to him. She would have no way to keep an eye on him and no good reason to try.

Stuffing the note into a pocket, Harry resumed walking towards the staircase as he brought his broom around. Seeing that the staircase was out of alignment, usefully leaving him facing an open gap into space with a precipitous drop of twenty feet, Harry hopped onto his broom and enjoyed the dive down. It was only as he began pulling out of the dive that he recognised the suit of armour that was clanking along an upper balcony, lance and all, trying to navigate the stairs that kept shifting. Unwilling to stick around and discover what the armour thought proper chastisement ought to be for an accidental bump, Harry threw the Firebolt into a full-on acceleration, timing it so

that as a group of students were headed outside through the main doors, he would shoot through the space over their heads.

As he shot through the open doorway, Harry saw the surprised expressions of his Gryffindor year-mates angling for the Care of Magical Creatures class, but he was moving too quickly for any words to be exchanged as he cruised down to Hagrid's cabin.

Hagrid was already standing outside, with half an ox partially wrapped up in an old, heavy canvas tarpaulin. The tarpaulin itself looked rather used and abused, an unsurprising condition considering it was carrying food for the Thestrals.

"Hullo, Harry," Hagrid said cheerfully.

Harry was the first to arrive and gave Hagrid a smile and a wave as he pulled out the special case for his broom. "Hello, Hagrid. Thestrals again today?" Stowing his broom and the case back into his bag, he looked up to see Hagrid striding off to a giant locker on his porch.

Hagrid pulled out what appeared to be the other half of the ox, and he grunted a bit as he carried it over and dropped it onto the tarpaulin. "Yeah, we'll be finishin' this unit today, barrin' an accident or summat."

"Sounds good, Hagrid," Harry offered. "Ginny tells me you helped her with Norman this morning?"

Hagrid stretched his arms out with an almighty crack, but his face was slightly puzzled. "Yeah, I was surprised at tha'. I didn't think yeh'd be ready for 'im for a few more months."

Harry made a mental note to discuss the lovely Tentacula and the schedule change with Neville as soon as he could get the boy isolated from Ginny's glares. "No worries, Hagrid. I found it all rather, uh, inspiring. She's quite good with Norman."

Hagrid waved at the other students either walking or flying down to his cabin, taking the apparent shift to regular broom travel rather



easily. "Yeah, she's about th' only one tha' can really calm a Skrewt down. She's good with most all o' th' critters, s'why I told Dumbledore to get 'er tutoring yeh. If yeh can learn how to treat 'em like that, you'll be fine come O.W.L.s, Harry. Won't make no never mind abou' startin' late at Hogwarts."

Harry paused to reflect about that for a moment or two before he was distracted by the arrival of a flying Ginny. Neville was leading the pack of others walking as they arrived, most of them casting a frown or two at either Harry or the tarpaulin and ox carcass. Hermione waved from behind Neville, but Ron was still clearly keeping his distance, even if he was not quite as obvious about it as he had been. Ginny shot him a smirk for reasons he was sure he would never comprehend, while Neville stepped up next to him and nodded at both Harry and Ginny.

"Thestrals again, I see." Neville's quiet voice made Harry lower his own.

"Hagrid said today closes this unit," Harry returned in a near whisper. "So let's think about what friendly creatures we'll see on Wednesday." Harry shot a withering glance at Ginny, but she was just smirking at him and literally patting herself on the back. "Pride, Gin-Gin," he muttered to her, "pride."

"Gather roun', you lot," Hagrid called. "Today we'll wrap up Thestrals, an' that means yeh all need to give me essays on th' care, habits, an' habitat of 'em. Min'mum one scroll, an' Hermione, no mor'n three, please. Due Wednesday, right?"

Not bothering to see if they were nodding their understanding, Hagrid grabbed a corner of the tarpaulin and began walking into the Forest, the two bloody lumps of an ox leaving a distinctly rancid odour in the air. It always reminded Harry of the metallic taste of aluminium foil for some reason, but the colour of their blood was a glossy ebony as the shadows of the forest preventing direct sunlight from letting the red flavours emerge.

They had no need to go far into the forest, as the recent classes had all been about Thestrals and the creatures had come to anticipate Hagrid's arrival with fresh – from their perspective – food. Easily a dozen Thestrals were congregated less than thirty yards into the Forest, and Hagrid let them happily tear away at the flesh of the ox as he began his final lecture on the strange winged horses. Their skeletal bodies and protruding fangs, coupled with the black leathery wings, left little to the imagination as to why many people naively thought the creatures Dark.

The students drew to a halt, but much to the unhappiness of several, Hagrid motioned them to come closer. “‘Ere, now, come look a’ this.” Hagrid reached into one pocket and rummaged for a minute before extracting something small and squeaking. “See here?”

Harry could see Hagrid holding up a bat. “This ‘ere is a Noctule, see th’ fur?” Hagrid made a great show of passing the bat in front of everyone, showing the rich golden colour on top of a dark brown skin. Behind him, the Thestrals were happily consuming the ox carcass. “Right fast li’l bugger, this type can get up t’ thirty miles an hour when he flies. But see, see th’ wings?”

Despite some shifting of the students, they all took what Harry would describe as a cursory glance at the bat at best. “These wings, they’re long here aroun’ the hand joint, but overall pretty short. An’ ‘ere at th’ tips, see how pointy they are? Right, this type o’ wing, an’ th’ long thin body, them’s what lets this wee bat fly so fast.”

The entire bat fit comfortably into Hagrid's palm as he pointed out how thin and lightweight the body was. “Th’ low body mass, see, coupled with these wings – this fellow can fly fast an’ turn sharp, but it has t’ pay a price for it. Tha’ much wind, well, it’s hard on th’ wings, an’ this simple bat can’t get any bigger.”

“Now,” Hagrid said, giving the bat a gentle lift into the air, then watching it fly off into the shadows of the forest. “These Thestrals most o’ you lot can’t see, th’ wings are very much like tha’ bat. Narrow membrane, long around the apex joint, but still rather short...

barely eight feet fully stretched out on either side, I'd say, for Tenebrus here, who is sort of the Alpha male adult."

Hagrid was absently stroking a Thestral that Harry, Neville, and Ginny could obviously see, but the rest were just looking warily in its general direction. "Now, the wing isn't attached like tha' bat, see, on Thestrals th' membrane runs from th' hind underbelly up t' th' shoulders 'fore it stretches out t' th' wing proper like. But it's th' narrow shape, the pointy tip, tha's what gives Thestrals their amazin' flyin' skills."

Hagrid went on to describe how the magic within a Thestral kept its invisibility intact, yet also made Thestrals very light-weight, almost like their magic kept a Featherweight Charm on them at all times. Otherwise, the wings could never take the strain of moving such a heavy load at the speeds Thestrals could attain. Hagrid mentioned that he knew a Thestral could match any broom not built along a racing design, but no one had ever measured just how fast one in a hurry could move. There were unconfirmed reports of up to one hundred miles per hour, but they could only do that for short periods of time.

Travelling at excess speeds used even more of the innate magic of the creatures to reverse the vortex shedding effects, allowing more efficient flight as the magic created a low-pressure vacuum in front of the Thestrals. This had the beneficial side effect of lowering the air pressure on any rider, although there would still be substantial enough wind to make long-term riding of a Thestral unpleasant at best.

When Thestrals were sickly, or too tired, their magic would begin to falter. It was recorded in the Monster Book of Monsters that a sufficiently drained Thestral actually became visible for brief moments to anyone. Common speculation held that the origin of seeing a Thestral as a harbinger of misfortune was probably from such an overly tired specimen. The person seeing the Thestral, reacting poorly to the surprising and almost certainly frightening physical countenance, likely told everyone of what he saw before having a serious accident in the excitement and surprise of the moment.

The magical point of note about Thestrals was that their magic was capable of a form of self-defence which would stun an attacker. The drawback to this was that if a Thestral attacked continuously for enough time, or if one drained too much magical energy from protracted flight and became fully visible, the magical reserves of the creature might deplete to a state where it could no longer maintain its body's lightened weight. Such Thestrals invariably collapsed under their own mass. Their skeletal bodies, never having adjusted to their actual weight, shattered when they impacted the earth. Invariably, a drained Thestral was a dead Thestral, but seeing one die was no key to seeing otherwise healthy Thestrals.

Hagrid finished his lecture by discussing the defensive nature of the Thestrals' magic. It was believed to act much like a Stunner, except it only affected areas, not specific targets with a tight focus. The exact nature of the defensive magic was a bit of a mystery, as it had been rarely encountered. No two accounts ever quite agreed on what triggered the reaction or on what exactly the reaction was.

During the walk out of the forest, Hagrid voiced what he claimed was the most curious aspect of Thestrals: the problem of why they could fly so fast, why Thestrals had defensive magic, and why they were invisible to anything that had no sentient understanding of death.

To the best of anyone's direct knowledge, Thestrals had no natural predator.

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Mon, 11 Sep 1995, 1:58 pm

"Harry, where are you going?" Neville's voice cut across the students universally walking back from Hagrid's class on Magical Creatures. "Aren't you supposed to be in DADA next?"

Harry shot a tight smile at the few students who paused to hear his response. "I've been told to stop attending as my Mentor has other plans for me. I'm sure you'll all learn loads, though, so do have fun." Ignoring the looks of incredulity, Harry hopped on his broom and flew over the misaligned stairs, heading for the infirmary.

No longer being required to sit through Umbridge's classes would be a boon he could rapidly learn to appreciate, especially given that she would not be allowing practical sessions under her tutelage. Harry was already so far ahead of his supposed peers in the O.W.L.-level class that Dumbledore's original argument to learn directly from Moody was the only reason he showed up in the first place. Unfortunately, with Fudge recalling Moody to beat the Auror force back into shape, that meant putting up with the hag. With Moody gone, Cyril's decision to remove him from the class was perfectly logical.

As Harry dropped off his broom and pushed open the doors to the infirmary, he found himself looking at McGonagall's back as she towered over Cyril's bed. The curtains were pulled back, and his Mentor's torso was so swathed in bandages that he appeared to be wearing a Muggle space suit around his chest, given how far out the pyjamas were from his body.

"Really, Cyril," McGonagall was saying, "you're being childish, not to mention petulant."

Cyril's view of Harry was blocked by McGonagall, so Harry strolled over as his Mentor argued with the professor. "I am not, Minerva. That woman spent too much time learning Muggle medicine. Sponge baths are not inherently better than Cleaning Charms!" Harry had to admit privately that McGonagall's comment might be spot on, as Cyril sounded like he was almost whining.

"Did she not explain it to you? That a comforting hand of compassion and humanity actually helps people to heal faster?" McGonagall paused as she seemed to realise that Harry was standing beside her and spared him a brief flicker of her eyes. "Patients who feel that their Healers care about them consistently heal better than those patients of Healers who have a strictly wand-only approach to healing."

Cyril transferred his gaze to Harry, not yielding an iota to the woman that was apparently teasing him. "Harry, I'm glad you're here. Get me

out of these bandages and help me find my wand. That Healer is coming back, and I want to be out of here long before then.”

Harry immediately held up both hands in silent protest. “Ah, Cyril, if I help you flee, do you know what Madam Pomfrey will do to me? Especially the next time I’m in need of her aid?” The evil grin she had faced Harry with earlier was all he needed to know of the matter underlying this argument, as he would not cross the mediwitch and then have her out for payback along with the majority of the Weasley clan.

Cyril’s eyes flashed with irritation as he folded his arms and frowned at both of them. McGonagall gave Harry a faint smile before she conjured a beautiful and plush chair to sit in. Harry had to admire her style. It strongly resembled a straight-backed and rigid wooden seat, but, standing next to it, he could tell that it was well-padded and appeared very soft. From a few feet away, he would never be able to distinguish between a real unpadded wooden chair and what she had flawlessly conjured.

Harry, for his part, was far too lazy to conjure something and just sank into the somewhat comfortable chair by the bedside. “Your concerns over your Healer aside, you wanted to see me?” Harry attempted an innocent tone, but he never could manage it.

Cyril gestured abruptly at McGonagall, refusing to do more than sulk faintly at the lack of aid Harry was offering his Mentor. McGonagall, however, kept her faint smile firmly in place as she gave Cyril a look so full of tolerance that only a blind man could miss it.

“Harry,” she offered at last, “we need to discuss what happened with the Wizengamot yesterday, not to mention that... incident in the corridor. I swear I am going to block off that corridor and force students to use some other path.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Harry believed that being polite and discreet would give him the best chance of avoiding any residual wrath from the Malfoy conflict.

McGonagall made a show of staring at Harry for a long moment. "Respect, Mr Potter, be it learned ever so late, is a good habit." Clearing her throat while Harry flinched at the barb, she adopted her customarily stern professorial demeanour. "While I have been informed that the Weasley children petitioned for an inquiry into Mr Snape's teaching, I have no doubt they were aided in some manner by at least one person in this room." Harry's look of polite inquiry fooled no one, he was sure, but he did feel obligated to at least act the part. "Mr Snape has lost all rights to teach or instruct anyone not yet of age and was forcibly removed from the castle last night. Aurors escorted him off the grounds and served him with notice that he is not to return without a written invitation from the Headmaster or Deputy Head."

Harry felt like cheering but instead opted to maintain his innocent countenance. "That's a shame, a great teacher like that, being forced to find a new way to make a living at the expense and suffering of others."

Cyril coughed abruptly while McGonagall glowered slightly. "Respect, Mr Potter, is a good habit that you should try to cultivate. Be that as it may, I happened to be made... privy to part of the evidence used in the Wizengamot decision. While I may personally think he was out of line, his departure does leave us in a bit of a quandary. Students not in their O.W.L. or N.E.W.T. year may not mind, but for those two groups, the loss of their Potions instructor will be quite problematic."

Harry shrugged slightly. "I'm almost certain there has got to be at least one other Potions master out there in the world looking for a job, Professor. Is a 'help wanted' advert truly so hard to place?"

McGonagall paused to watch Harry with what he felt to be exacting scrutiny, leaving him with the desire to shift around in his seat. Concentrating on his breathing exercises, Harry let the long silence pass while striving to maintain mental balance. Any reaction on his part to her stare would invariably set up a later pattern of his submission to her power, and while he had to admit to an abiding respect for the woman, he was unwilling to set the precedent of capitulation.

“Indeed, Mr Potter. Professor Emeritus Horace Slughorn, the Potions master who taught here for many years before Mr Snape, will be returning to the castle on Wednesday. Mr Snape was his protégé, but do not hold that against him.” McGonagall seemed to hesitate about saying anything else before she made a show of checking the room for others. “I dare say you can find reasons enough to dislike any man, Mr Potter, but Professor Slughorn does tend to be somewhat polarising in his own way.”

Cyril snorted slightly. “Polarising? Is that how you’d describe him? Might as well call him a jolly old boy and let the wolf in amongst the sheep.”

McGonagall turned to glare at Cyril. “Wolf? Sheep? Are you sure you should be out of St Mungo’s already? The man has never hurt a student, you know that.”

“Oh,” Cyril shot back, “never hurt a student, fine. That doesn’t mean he’s never used one, however.”

“Cyril, must we go over this conversation again? He knows the curriculum, he’s completely knowledgeable of the subject, he has agreed to take over the remainder of the year, and it gives us time to search for a long-term replacement.” Harry thought McGonagall’s tone was one of resignation to an argument that had been going forward for hours if not days.

Harry was situated perfectly to see the infirmary doors swing open silently as a woman in long flowing green robes walked in briskly. Cyril and McGonagall were glaring at each other and had no reaction to the new presence. The new arrival was followed almost immediately by Madam Pomfrey, who once again had that disconcertingly evil smirk upon her face.

Harry guessed that the unknown woman was in her late twenties. Her lustrous dark hair fell well below her shoulders. She had warm eyes that were almost twin wells of brown in her delicate face, and her light frame moved with a carriage he generally only saw in people that were very self confident. Her skin was surprisingly light in colour, as



though she rarely was in direct sunlight for any amount of time. All in all, she had a refined appearance and facial structure that Harry could only describe as quite pretty.

The dazzling smile she levelled at McGonagall, however, surprised him. "Auntie Minerva!" She rushed to the professor and wrapped her in an embrace, causing McGonagall to cough lightly as the professor turned slightly red.

"Really, Celeste, do remember that we're not all your age, would you? These old bones aren't what they used to be." The professor had a gentle smile openly on her face, before she turned and scowled at Cyril. "Did I not mention that you have been disparaging my favourite niece all this time, Cyril? You should be thrilled an attractive young woman is actually paying attention to you, rather than trying to spoon porridge down your feeble throat!"

Harry suddenly understood the wicked smirk on Madam Pomfrey's face, and he knew he was about to have a similar expression. Quickly and silently leaving the brewing row between the just-met Healer, Cyril, and McGonagall, Harry decided it was time to head home.

On his way out of the castle, Harry noticed that Umbridge had finally posted the Wizengamot Law regarding the High Inquisitor in the castle. It appeared to be posted every three feet in the entrance hall, and multiple copies adorned the doors into the Great Hall.

As Harry stood outside the gates of Hogwarts, he let his eyes run over the castle and grounds. It was an exquisitely picturesque sight, something he was glad he had been able to finally see. On the other hand, it was also a rat's nest of problems he really wanted nothing to do with. As with everything in life, you had to take the good with the bad.

Before using his secure Portkey, Harry paused to consider his own security. While Dumbledore was out of action, there were others that invariably wanted to keep tabs on him. Conducting the routine sweep and collection for Tracking or Locating Charms, Harry was disturbed to find one of each lingering on his person. Flicking them off and

binding them to the gates of the castle, Harry just shook his head as he activated the Portkey with a soft cry of, "Cobalt Sanctuary!"

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Mon, 11 Sep 1995, 2:24 pm

"Remus!" Harry was surprised but happy to see his friend sitting at the kitchen table, nursing what appeared to be a cup of coffee. "How are you?"

"Hello, Harry." Remus' eyes seemed to light up a bit as he regarded Harry. "I'll be fine. I'm just a little tired. Not taking every dose of Wolfsbane leaves me out of sorts, you know that. And that's not even getting into the little fracas here and there that associating with you brings along. Now, aren't you somewhat early? Please tell me you didn't instigate another skirmish with Umbridge."

Harry just grinned at Remus and took a seat across from his friend. "Yeah, like I need to pick a fight with her. She's good at picking them all on her own. You won't believe this..." Harry spent a few minutes relaying the gist of the day, emphasising in particular the bits around Cyril and his current status of unwilling patient.

"Okay, we need to get those memories from you. Blackmail on Cyril. Who would have thought that this day would come?" Remus looked almost gleeful. Sirius had come in during the conversation and had a beatific smile on as he considered the implications. "You know we never did get anything on Nicolas no matter how hard we tried. I thought Cyril would be equally difficult."

Harry winced a bit at remembering the elaborate yet failed pranks and set-ups they had tried to work against Nicolas, but he let the pain go for the moment. It was better to remember the fun times than how everything ended. "Speaking of which, I'm using my last sensory monitor. I need to get the old ones back and cycle out the ones I've filled up."

Harry rummaged around in his pack before he handed over a small steel case nearly full with ten used sensory monitors inside. Remus told him the others were ready and in his room, just waiting for him to pick them up.

“Perfect. Thanks.” Harry stood up to retrieve them when Remus’ voice caused him to pause.

“Harry, did Ginny pass along the message earlier?”

“Family meeting and working dinner? Yeah, I got that.”

“Good,” Remus said quietly. “There’s a stack of documents you need to go through on your desk that have to be dealt with immediately. Do that before training, all right? Tonight we’ll discuss everything else.”

“Right, okay, Remus.” Harry jogged up to his room, spotting the pile of paperwork on his desk next to another steel case for carrying sensory monitors. Hedwig, who had been sleeping in the corner, cracked open one eye at his sudden arrival and let out a soft “Hoot!”

Harry walked over to her, smiling the whole way. “Hello, girl. It’s been a few days, hasn’t it? Maybe tonight I can talk to Remus about bringing you to Hogwarts.” Harry absently stroked her feathers as he carried her and her perch over to his desk. As he settled down to read, he enjoyed the soothing sensation that the feathers provided under his fingers, ignoring the occasional playful nip of her beak. Harry had almost a full hour before training would begin with Master Gata, and, given the size of the paper stack, he was clearly going to need every last minute.

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Mon, 11 Sep 1995, 6:17 pm

Harry had spent the past twenty minutes putting the finishing touches on a dinner that Sirius and Remus helped him cobble together from an unusually bare larder. Remus had said he would be running to the

shops on the morrow, but he just was not in the condition for it today. Sirius, of course, was unable to go anywhere in human guise unless they found some way to clear his name.

Edgar was moving casually about the table while talking, pouring out the preferred drinks for each seat. He and David would be taking wine, Remus and Sirius a bit of lager, and Harry would have butterbeer unless things got tiresome, in which case he would break out the tea collection.

“The first task we set out to achieve is complete. Severus has been isolated from the others and is now much more likely to report directly to Voldemort on a frequent basis. His excuse of serving as a double-agent that has to maintain a low profile while teaching is no longer valid.” Edgar began rummaging through some papers from his case. “The best part is that he is unaware of our goals and assumes Harry is merely using the Weasleys to front a personal grudge.”

Edgar proceeded to slide a scroll of parchment directly in front of Harry, neatly avoiding the knife Harry was using. Unrolling it, Harry was amused to see the full text of the Wizengamot decree that Umbridge had handed him earlier. Harry gave it a second careful reading, being sure that what the hag had given him matched Edgar’s version. As far as he could discern, the two were identical.

“I think this is brilliant, by the way.” Harry chuckled as he passed the parchment over to Remus. “She was completely surprised that she was not, in fact, the High Inquisitor, and that even if she were, the post only allows the Inquisitor to ask questions.”

Edgar almost visibly preened under the observation from Harry. “I do what I can, you know. It was quite challenging to change that under their noses, but all the preparation work with the various riders and extensions were quite useful. I wrote that onto the end of the Asset Redistribution Rider, which I also managed to get through.” Remus started laughing as he read through the official decree from the Wizengamot, giving Edgar a wide grin.

“So where does this leave the Malfoys?” Harry wanted to move this working dinner back onto the topics they needed to cover before Edgar could turn it into a self-congratulation ceremony. The vampire had his quirks and quite an ego, but he was a fiendishly clever mind.

“Lucius Malfoy is, quite simply, out of liquid assets. I’m certain he has cash reserves at the family Manor, but according to the goblins, his vaults are quite empty of hard currency. He asked our firm to represent his family and their colleagues involved with yesterday’s mess. I suspect he was acting under orders, as his usual manner is more subtle than that farce.” Edgar shuffled the papers on the table for a moment. “Ah, yes. Due to the multiple parties involved and the sheer number of laws broken, I asked for the standard 10,000 Galleon fee for complex cases, plus expenses, of course. When I had to inform him the goblins refused to honour his note due to insufficient funds, he became most agitated. I left as he was sending for his wife.”

“Hmm.” Harry leaned back as he enjoyed the butterbeer and aromas of a dinner just waiting his father’s arrival. “Doesn’t that put you in a delicate position? They all know you’ve worked with me and against Snape.”

Remus rejoined the conversation, having finished his scrutiny of the parchments on the table. “No, it shouldn’t matter. They know this is a new Business, backed and run by the goblins, and it operates on the same tenets as Gringotts does. Business is Business, and there’s never anything personal involved, even if they wanted to make it personal. The oaths don’t allow it.”

Edgar nodded his head in agreement. “We’ve made it very clear to every client that we operate by Goblin Business Laws, so while we may represent them today, tomorrow we may represent their opponents. It’s strictly a matter of who has the resources to hire us.” Edgar paused as he let a vicious smile cross his face, the tips of fangs flashing in the soft light. “Of course, when I told Lucius that I demand more compensation when working for such a risky figure as our Mr Potter, well, he seemed quite satisfied.”

Sirius groaned and put his head on the table. "You're too clever for your own good, Edgar. More compensation? You're already raking it in hand over fist!"

Harry and Edgar shared a smirk. "That was the idea, wasn't it?" Harry asked the room at large.

Remus tapped one slip of parchment he had left on top. "So when Malfoy tries to liquidate some of his tracts of land, this rider will kick in?"

Edgar once again adopted the self-congratulatory smile as he poured himself a second glass of wine, having smoothly drained the prior one. "Naturally. It has a no-grandfather clause. After all, we can't have our historically vital places just parcelled out willy-nilly. We need Wizengamot oversight for such things, wouldn't you say? And when you consider the existing requirements for land transfer, this will be in full force long before the Malfoys will have sufficient cash to pose a problem."

Harry was surprised by the statement. "How do you know? I thought they collect routine stipends and rents, not to mention the quarterly profit-sharing from their investments."

Edgar waved the question off. "The goblins let slip a tiny detail or two. Purely accidentally, you know. I'm sure if they knew I was within hearing distance, they would have said naught. The Malfoy family is reduced to the same state as yourself, Harry. They have what cash they have in their pockets, and no more until the end of this month. It's too bad, really, that Fudge is out of the country for a few days. He doesn't need to be here for trials, after all."

The laughter at the table was anything but sympathetic to the Malfoy plight, which Harry felt was long overdue. "Right, so what's this nonsense about that moron Draco being reinstated at Hogwarts?"

Edgar shrugged. "Well, he was reinstated. That's been rescinded pending the ongoing investigation. I think it's safe to say that the Malfoy heir may be exonerated, but his readmission to Hogwarts is likely to be revoked indefinitely. Either he was a willing participant in

the masquerade, or else his father was abusing him. In the first case, he's going to spend some quality time in Azkaban. In the latter case, he's going to become a Ward of the Ministry and spend some quality time in therapy."

Sirius waved his own hand, gathering everyone's attention. "What if old Lucy tries to claim that Draco was never returned to him? That it's all the fault of the Ministry?"

Edgar merely shrugged apathetically, savouring his wine. "That would be a most unwise move. Malfoy requires the good will of the Ministry, and the Minister in particular. Such claims would not be well received."

Remus nodded once before asking what Harry wanted to. "And what of the others?"

"The Goyle and Crabbe boys are apparently enjoying their time at Durmstrang. Rumour has it that Snape moved into the Hog's Head pub in Hogsmeade, but I have yet to obtain confirmation of that." Edgar rose and brought the sliced bread to the table that Harry had forgotten about, passing around the plate after taking one piece for himself. "Apparently Master Auror Moody has taken his two students to task rather sharply over their loss to your Mentor and yourself, Harry. That doesn't even begin to describe the tongue lashing they received over not knowing who they were escorting, or for failing to detect Polyjuiced impersonators. I've heard rumours that he is planning to reinstate an obstacle course that was dismantled after the first fall of Voldemort. This time he'll be removing the 'safeties' from the obstacles."

Sirius and Remus both visibly winced at that statement, leaving Harry curious to know what they suspected about Moody's obstacle course. Having routinely run his own gauntlet with his various mentors and trainers, he had a deep and abiding appreciation for how diabolical and merciless that type of training could become. If his mentors were cringing at the idea of a Moody-designed course, then it had to be a true work of art to witness.

Harry looked back at Edgar, wondering why the Wizengamot meeting took so many hours for so few items of business. It was a peculiarity of the process that back in the 1800's, a rule was passed that all old business must be settled before any new business could be addressed. "So was there anything else of interest at the meeting?"

Edgar said nothing as he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Harry knew from long association that this was simply the method the vampire preferred to use when reflecting upon a topic. After a few long moments of companionable silence, Edgar sat back up and regarded them all. "There was the usual mishmash of items, old matters of no relevance. There were a few things that did not make sense, however, but they were merely status assignments. For example, Walden Macnair has apparently been missing for some months, and his family has petitioned to have him legally declared dead. That was granted. Aberforth Dumbledore petitioned that the provisional status of the Hog's Head as a historic magical landmark be granted, and it was. Neither of these makes sense to me, but perhaps they do to you?"

Remus, Sirius, and Harry all exchanged glances, making it obvious that nothing was known about these two events. "Well," Remus said after a moment. "Aberforth always has been a bit strange. If he can pull it off, I suppose it might mean more business for him. But Macnair... we all know he's on our list of Death Eaters to watch. He disappeared before Voldemort's rebirth, which is puzzling, but he also never stood out as anything other than violent, somewhat slow-witted, and aggressive."

Harry shrugged in turn. "I've not heard anything at the castle about it. Maybe he finally found a creature that beheaded him instead of the other way round?"

"Well, why did you have to go to the Manx Wizengamot?" Remus asked, switching the focus back to what really was happening. "I thought I understood that you went there first?"

"The Dumbledores are joint citizens of the Manx and Albion Wizengamots," Edgar replied with a vague wave. "Since Aberforth



had to petition in both places, and old business must be finished first, we started at the Manx council and then moved back.”

The sound of the front door loudly opening and closing cut off the conversation as they all heard David coming home. “We’re in the kitchen, Dad,” Harry called out. “Remus said you’d be a bit late, so we went ahead and made dinner without you.”

David entered the kitchen moments later, dropping a small bag of groceries and a case onto the counter. Harry rose and exchanged a quick hug of welcome with his adoptive father, happy to see the light in his father’s grey eyes as they regarded each other. Moving back to the table, both took their places silently.

Harry understood intellectually that many teenagers were in a mild state of rebellion, trying to strike out on their own and show their independence from their parents. Harry, however, understood that he might not have the chance to get another hug. Fate might suddenly still a beating heart; a killer might attack. He had more independence in his life than most teens, and he could not fathom the idea of avoiding his father simply for some silly moment of pride.

Silence settled on the group as they began to eat. Harry became aware that Remus and Sirius were acting unusually nervous for reasons not explained as yet. Edgar, while not being hasty, was certainly eating more quickly than his usual unhurried manner. The entire scene was leading up to something that clearly only David wanted to discuss. Deciding to take his time and wait for everything to fall out naturally, Harry opted to eat in peace.

“Well,” David finally said, “I guess I should start this, eh?”

Harry was mildly relieved that they were finally going to talk about whatever was going on. “Start what, Dad? Remus said you wanted a family meeting, but no one has said why.”

David pushed around his food while staring at the plate, seemingly lost in thought. “Harry, I heard about the weekend. I heard about the Horcrux, the Headmaster, and, through Edgar, about the Malfoys and Aurors.” Harry continued to eat calmly, knowing his father was slowly

working his way to a point. "I acquiesced to Remus and Edgar when they told me that you needed to train under Dumbledore, but now Dumbledore's apparently lost his magic or some such, which I was also told wasn't possible."

Remus shifted a bit but kept silent. Sirius looked uncomfortable. Edgar just closed his eyes. Harry had seen that expression when the vampire was expecting some kind of axe to fall, so it was only a matter of moments.

David was now toying with his glass of wine, having given up on dinner entirely. "I find that the assurances of your safety, Harry, that I was given have been quite hollow. The safety of the castle, the safety of your care, the theory and rules you all have been working out... none of it is supported by the evidence from where I'm sitting. Cyril has the experience and knowledge in general, but he's not intimately familiar with our Riddle, now is he? And his inexperience is attested to by this weekend."

David stopped playing with the glass and met Harry's gaze. "I think, Harry, that I must ask you to stop attending Hogwarts."

Harry found himself neither entirely surprised by the statement nor particularly alarmed. On the one hand, he knew he was under a magical contract and could not simply stop attending unless released directly by the Headmaster or Deputy Head. On the other hand, Severus Snape was now dislodged from the building and unable to return. The only reason to remain would be to study advanced magic under the guidance of Dumbledore, but that at present was not an option.

"I see," Harry said at last. "Well, it's certainly possible to stop going. Would it actually solve anything? I'll agree right now that there's no pressing reason for me to continue there, although I have promised some people I would help them. I'd have to find a way to do that without being at Hogwarts."

Remus and Sirius both exchanged a long look. "Er," Sirius offered, "what about the oath?"

Harry waved it aside. "Easily overcome," Harry said quietly, pushing his finished plate away. "Edgar knows that as well." The vampire nodded his assent, still keeping his eyes closed. "Why do I have the feeling that this isn't an argument you plan on winning, Dad?"

David suddenly closed his eyes and affected the same posture as the vampire. Over the past year or so, Harry had noticed that the mannerisms of his father were gradually becoming more and more like the vampire. Likewise, he thought the vampire was picking up a few of the peculiarities of the David. It was an odd blend of traits between the two, but it was amusing to watch. His father was a rather remote man, and Harry thought it was good he had found someone to talk to openly about topics he would shy away from with anyone else.

"I know that ultimately one of you will talk me out of it." David sat up and looked back at Harry. "So this is my concession price. You get to stay, but you no longer go off the castle grounds by yourself. Not once. The only exception is when you're coming here. At the minimum, Sirius and Remus will both escort you everywhere whenever you leave the gates or grounds proper."

Harry paused to consider what that meant. Trips to Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, or the like held no interest for him as casual excursions. Any time he left, he was already in the company of at least one of those his father listed. Being in the company of both would be a little harder to coordinate, but it would ultimately change nothing.

"That's fine," Harry offered with a shrug. "Doesn't seem to change much. The only problem I can see is if Cyril wants me to do something specific that they aren't legally allowed to come along for."

David nodded at that. "That's an acceptable exception. However, you will notify them of where you're going, how long you'll be gone, and such. At least as much as you're able to."

"Okay. So why is Edgar still looking like he wants to run out of the room?"

“Er,” Remus offered quietly. “That’s more of, uh, my doing, Harry.” The tangible nervousness of his friend was starting to really worry Harry. “I talked to everyone about how things have been going, showed them some memories, and Edgar turned up a copy of your memory of the Malfoy conflict.”

Harry turned his full attention onto Remus as he waited for what was coming.

“We, uh, think... well, we think you need to start therapy again, Harry.”

Harry froze, his eyes widening slightly, albeit unconsciously. “Oh?” He knew his voice was like ice but was unable to stop that.

Sirius broke in to the conversation, staring hard at Harry. “Look, it wasn’t your fault what happened last time. You know that, right?”

Harry’s voice was completely flat. “I’m perfectly well aware of that, Sirius. I’m also aware of that fact that I cannot tell anyone anything about my life, which makes even the idea of therapy ludicrous. I appreciate your concerns, but nothing has changed since the last time we talked about this.”

Without saying another word, Harry collected his dishes, placed them in the sink, and went to sit in the study. Aside from his father’s desk, covered in work, and the many books, the study also had photographs all over the walls. Some were distant relatives, pictures of holidays in other places, and far too many to count had Remus, along with the Kepson family, doing something crazy. Harry had no idea how long he stood there, moving among the pictures, echoes of times and places long gone flitting through his mind.

He knew the soft tread of feet behind him belonged to his father, but he was not willing to revisit the memories and emotions that had ruled his life once before. The time for weakness and uncertainty was over, and it was time for movements, plans, and action to all coincide at precisely the right time.

“Son?” The hand on Harry’s shoulder was supporting, but the tone was as rocky as what Harry knew he was fighting himself. “It’s not your fault. You’re smart enough to know that.”

Harry said nothing but let his eyes glaze over as he began to count powers of eleven in his head. The problem with non-prime powers was that they rapidly became patterns of prime powers. Harry had learned long ago that, when all else failed, working the digits of prime powers kept everything properly leashed and put a safe distance between what he was feeling and what he outwardly revealed.

His father turned him around, and they exchanged a long look. Harry was already into seven digits from long habit. His father’s eyes were sad and tense, while Harry tried to both meet the eyes and yet not actually see them. “We’re going to try and find a way around the problems, Harry. We’re telling you this so you won’t be surprised if we succeed. Remus is already looking for someone who knows of the magical world and has the training, someone we can put the Fidelius on.”

Harry was getting lost in the digits, confused as to where the seven belonged – it was either the fourth or fifth most significant digit, but it was getting too hard to concentrate. Giving it up as a bad job, Harry backed down and began working the powers of three through his head, while nodding absently at his father. His father would understand the distance. He always understood.

“It’s getting on towards eight, Harry. Remus asked if you would go back and escort the Weasley girl to the Shack tonight, show her how to get in and out safely. He’ll use that for a tutorial place for now.”

Harry stopped at five million and change. “Right.” His voice was a bit unsteady, but that was the way things went. “I’d best be off, then.” Ginny needed training from him, too, and that was easy to think about. Physical conditioning first. Something tangible, something simple. He needed to talk to Ginny to get her schedule locked down and fixed.

With a cursory hug to his father and a nod to the others sitting quietly at the dinner table, Harry stepped outside and moved to the

Apparition point. In the darkness, he could feel Hedwig flying about, hunting for her dinner. Somewhere in the distance, a garden snake out in the open fell to the forces of nature. The jerk behind his navel as he activated the Portkey was a welcome sensation of familiarity.

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Mon, 11 Sep 1995, 8:09 pm

Ginny was sitting in the middle of a long sofa, the tome on magical theory on the table in front of her, protruding slightly out of her bag. Neville was next to her, and the pair were talking in hushed tones. Harry recognised them as soon as he entered the Gryffindor common room, ignoring the oppressive silence that descended as implicit acknowledgement of his presence.

Moving to the sofa, both Neville and Ginny looked up in some surprise, probably from not expecting him to willingly enter the domain of regular students any time soon. "I need to talk to Ginny, Neville. Do either of you mind if I join you while I wait?"

Ginny was looking at Harry closely, but he merely shrugged off her visual inquisition. "Ah, that's fine Harry." Neville sounded a little uncomfortable, but no more so than what appeared to be normal when confronted with the unexpected. The unwanted scrutiny and whispers of everyone in the common room seemed to deflate the kind soul immensely.

Motioning Harry down to the empty seat on her other side, Ginny returned her attention to Neville. "I'm telling you not to worry about it, Neville. Twice doesn't mean anything. You were there, you were understanding and your usual gentle self, and that probably led to the second time. I wouldn't be surprised if there's a third and fourth time. I doubt it's even a conscious act at this point. She's probably seeking the only comfort that is certain right now."

Neville looked a little uncertain himself. "So you think I should just act like normal?"

“Exactly.” Ginny reached out and patted Neville’s shoulder. “Just be yourself, Neville. It’s not like anything is going on. You’re just being good to a friend in need.”

“All right,” Neville said after a moment. “Thanks, Ginny.”

“No problem,” Ginny said. Harry thought she sounded a bit cynical. “It seems to be the day for these questions.”

“Oh?” Neville was obviously curious as to what had led to that statement. He shot Harry a glance, but Harry shrugged his own ignorance of her meaning.

“Don’t worry about it, Neville,” Ginny said with a wave. “Just stupid boys and their testosterone interfering with their little brains.” She said the last with a sweet smile at Harry. “Isn’t that right, Harry?”

Harry held up both hands in silent defence. “You don’t really expect me to walk into that, now do you?” Given what he witnessed at the greenhouses that morning, he had to secretly admit he was now rather curious as to what the entire conversation had been about.

“See?” Ginny said with a triumphant smirk. “I win again.”

Neville laughed a bit as he rose and gathered his books. “I’m off to meet Hermione in the library. I’ll see you two later.” Neville shook his head on his way out of the common room, and Harry had to admit that Neville knew when to leave before things became pointlessly confrontational.

Ginny faced Harry fully, a hint of a smirk about her features.

“Remus wants to talk to you.” Harry watched her eyes flicker about the room for a moment. “Not here. Follow me, right?”

Ginny gathered up her own things as she followed Harry back into the corridor, and they began making their way down the halls. “Uh, Harry, where’s your broom?”

Harry paused mid-stride, unconsciously reaching for a bag and broom that were not present. "Bugger!" Harry had the sinking realisation that they were both in his bedroom. "Guess I left them at home. I'll have to get them after dropping you off."

Ginny said nothing as they began walking again. When they were finally descending the main staircase, she broke the silence. "You don't seem like you casually forget things like that."

Harry continued in silence, not particularly desiring to talk about why he had forgotten something so simple.

"So where are you taking me, Mr Potter?"

Harry held the doors open as Ginny moved past him to the grounds. "You'll see. No noise, now, right?" When Ginny nodded, Harry guided her into the deep shadows on the side of the castle. Harry cast a Disillusionment charm on both of them in rapid succession, ignoring her faint shudder. He was warm enough, but she was wearing lighter clothes than his habitual boots, heavy trousers, and long sleeved shirt. "Walk slowly, now, or else the charm ripples. Put your hand on my shoulder, there, right. No talking."

As they moved slowly across the grounds towards the Whomping Willow, Harry paused to pick up a fist-sized rock from the ground. "At the base of tree, that large knot – I'm going to Banish this rock into it to make the tree stop moving. Remember this trick." With a flick of his wand, the rock slammed into the knot with a soft crack! The tree continued to gently sway in the light wind but reacted not at all as the pair slipped into the tunnel at its base. The whole way into the tunnel, Ginny's grip on Harry's shoulder was painfully tight.

Once they were safely in the tunnel, Harry released the Disillusionment Charms and looked at Ginny in the flickering light from the twilight outside. "You seemed anxious about the Willow. Problems?"

Ginny shook her head. "Not like that. I've seen it smash Quidditch brooms with Unbreakable Charms, though, so I didn't like the idea of



being so close to it.” Harry lit his wand with a silent Lumos! and Ginny shuddered slightly again as the wind stirred the leaves around their feet. “How long will it be frozen?”

Harry pointed up needlessly. “It’s already back to normal. You have maybe thirty seconds to get in here. You can do the Banishing Charm accurately enough?” At Ginny’s nod, Harry waved her to follow him down the tunnel. “I’ll teach you the Disillusionment Charm this week. In the meantime, talk to Remus about keeping your schedule to dark hours so you won’t be seen coming and going.”

“Where does this tunnel go?”

Harry glanced at her briefly as he walked along. “The Shrieking Shack.”

Ginny stopped dead in the path. “Uh, isn’t that supposed to be, well, the most haunted building in Britain?”

Harry smirked. “Right. That’s where Remus goes when he’s missed his potions and has to transform. Good façade to spread rumours about it being haunted, wouldn’t you say?”

Ginny visibly swallowed once or twice before she fell into place with Harry. “You know, Harry, the way you casually shrug off some of the stuff that I grew up learning is kind of...”

“Sexy?”

“Ha ha.” Ginny hit him hard in the arm. “More like disturbing. That’s it. You’re a disturbing fellow, Harry.”

Harry sighed softly. “And disturbed, also.” Before Ginny could ask the question in her eyes, Harry indicated that they had arrived. Climbing up into the Shack, they found Remus sitting in a chair with Harry’s bag and Firebolt at his feet.

With a wave, Harry picked up his bag and broom with a quiet, “Thanks.” Remus said nothing but nodded his head. “Ginny,” Harry

said as he moved towards the exit, “meet me outside the common room tomorrow at 5 am. We need to start your training.”

Without waiting for a response, Harry dropped back into the tunnel and made his way back to his room. Casting the Disillusionment Charm on himself had become habitual whenever he approached the exit of the tunnel, and he opted to keep it on as he moved through the corridors just to avoid being bothered by anyone. It meant he had to walk a little slower, but he was in no hurry.

When safely ensconced in the privacy of the suite he shared with Cyril, Harry dropped onto his bed and stared idly at the ceiling. He had dropped off his bag and broom on the small desk, reminders that he had homework he should complete. Cyril’s damn mirror was there as well, taunting him with his inability to see clearly.

Rolling onto his side, Harry looked into the mirror. The mirror was merely a reflection of reality, but the eyes that beheld the reflection were still skewed by the mind behind them. Harry idly wondered what most people saw when they looked into a mirror: minor imperfections, scars, messed hair, something simple, something profound?

All Harry could see before he drifted off was the faint scar running down the left side of his neck.

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A/N:

At last, is caught up with all the chapters already published. Coming next, Echoes-1-23, and it'll premiere here first – very soon. Watch this space!

Using the information revealed in Chapters 21 and 22, you may find some obscure things suddenly less so back in the earlier chapters – perhaps 1 through 8.

To really start understanding the relationship between wing shape, body mass, lift, drag, forward velocity and vortex shedding, there are quite a few articles out there. You might try reading Thollessen and

Norberg's "Moments of Inertia of Bat Wings and Body" (J. Exp. Bio., 158, 19-35, 1991) as an introduction. This isn't my field, but it's still fun to read and think about.

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to Chreechree and cwarbeck. Thanks to Reg and other folks for lending their Brit-picking data, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

I'm still open for new/more Brit-Picker(s) to move things along. Minimum qualifications: adult age, half a brain, native of England or at least lived there for 10+ years, wide range in sense of humour, and plenty of time to slog through a lot of material. Ideal qualifications: adult, full brain that's actually engaged 90 percent of the time, native of England having lived there for at least the first 20 years of your life, and a sense of humour that would put Robin Williams to shame. Obviously, I'll take what I can get. PM me if you're interested.

To fill a gap  
Insert the Thing that caused it –  
Block it up  
With Other – and ‘twill yawn the more –  
You cannot solder an Abyss  
With Air.  
…Emily Dickinson, c. 1862, #546

Mon, 1 Jun 1987

“Mr Dumbledore to see you, Willem,” the perky blonde called whilst leaning through the open doorway. Albus stood back and patiently watched as the short, blocky young gentleman behind the desk waved the notification away without looking up. The new receptionist smiled at the old gentleman and left with a spring in her step. Albus walked slowly into the massively cluttered office and silently reclaimed the same chair from his previous four visits.

Near the beginning of each month, he came to inquire about Harry Potter, and each month, there was no news. He had been pleasantly inquiring of Willem ever since meeting the young man in February, and today would be no different.

At last, the man behind the Willem Matherson desk placard looked up and smiled slightly. “Ah, Mr, uh, Dumbledrum, is it?”

Dumbledore nodded his head slightly, taking no offence. “Dumbledore, yes. How are you this morning, Mr Matherson?” The young man appeared frazzled yet oddly happy to be in such a state.

“Good, good!” Willem stood up and moved over to a rather precarious tower of papers, rifling through the top two or three inches. “Back again to inquire about our missing Master, mmm, Potter, right?” Finally plucking a thin folder out of the pile, Willem returned to his seat as Dumbledore continued to sit patiently.

“Indeed. Have you had any news, then?”

“Well, in a manner of speaking, yes,” Willem said, sliding the thin oak-tag folder under the sheet of paper he had been poring over previously. The young man’s earnest blue eyes regarded Dumbledore solemnly. “We’ve been contacted by our sister office, see. His new guardians are trying to sort out some problems with the paperwork for his therapy or some such. I can’t give you any addresses or anything, Mr, er, Dumbledorf, but I can pass along a message to his guardians.”

Dumbledore schooled his features, carefully taking regulated, deep breaths to avoid a rapid increase in blood pressure. That Harry Potter had been located in any manner was quite good news, but the notion that he apparently was with people who were tending to his well-being was beyond what he had hoped for. The past few months had been a depressing saga of failure to track down the young boy by any means, magical or Muggle. Dumbledore had been unwilling to completely give up, which was why he was once more calling on Mr Matherson, but, in truth, he had finally reached the point where he never really expected Harry Potter to ever be found.

“I understand,” he offered quietly, “but there’s a slight problem. You see, I travel quite a bit, and it can be rather challenging to reach me if you don’t know my schedule. I do, however, have a friend that lives nearby. She holds my mail for me until I come by to collect it. Perhaps I could leave her information and write a short message for young Harry’s guardians that you might relay?”

Willem smiled broadly, clearly relieved that Dumbledore would not be making a scene over the situation. “That will be no problem at all. Here, let me just fetch you some paper and a pen.” After digging through a drawer briefly, the young man slid both items across the desk into easy reach.

Leaning back for a moment, Dumbledore paused to collect his thoughts. It would require the right balance of politeness, concern, and sympathy to open the doors he needed to open so quickly. Setting pen to paper, he briefly reflected at the ingenuity of Muggles as he composed his short letter to be delivered to Harry’s temporary guardians.

When he had finished, he folded the paper in half and wrote his Muggle-based contact address and phone number, using those of Arabella's house. His letter complete, he stood up slowly, not entirely feigning the stiffness that old age and battles past presented when confronted with uncomfortable furniture.

Willem Matherson looked up from the papers he was once again working on and smiled brightly. "All finished then?"

"Indeed. I thank you for your time, Mr Matherson."

"Anytime, anytime," Willem said as he pulled the paper to him and gave it a cursory glance. "This is your contact address, right, Mr, er, Dumbledore?"

"Correct."

"Perfect. I'll pass this along and make a copy of how to reach you. When we hear back from them, we'll be in touch." Willem stood and held out a hand, a lopsided smile firmly in place. "I'm very glad we've found the boy you've been looking for, sir."

Dumbledore slowly took Willem's hand in his own, making sure he had a firm grip as he looked over his thin glasses and made solid eye contact with the young man. A personal touch always helped reassure people. "As am I, Mr Matherson, as am I."

Mon, 24 Aug 1987  
Mr Brian Dumbledore  
c/o Ms Arabella Figg

Mr Dumbledore,

We have been notified by the social care programme office of Surrey that you are seeking to be placed in contact with our ward, Harry Potter. The information forwarded to us gave us this contact address, saying merely that you are an old family friend and seek to be sure of Harry's good care and well being. We were also forwarded a short

missive you left with Mr Matherson. Apparently you found out about the situation at Harry's former residence from the papers, or so we have been led to believe based on your letter.

With regards to Harry's care, you may rest assured that he is being well cared for, and we have hopes that his path to recovery has begun. At the same time, we find ourselves confronted with many challenges in dealing with the neglect and abuse that Harry has experienced for many years. We trust you will understand that our correspondence must, at this time, remain through the various social care programme offices, as we are unwilling to share our address with just anyone.

Since you have identified yourself as an "old family friend", we wish to ask you who exactly you are, and what your relation to the Potter family was. Furthermore, we must insist that you explain how an old family friend that is now actively seeking to make contact remained unaware of the home life that Harry experienced previously. We note that the forwarding address of Ms Figg is mere blocks from the prior residence of Harry.

How is that you could be an old family friend, and yet we have never heard of you from Harry? How is that an old family friend who was frequently within the neighbourhood never looked in on, or intervened in, Harry's home life?

At this time, your requests for visitation must be refused. Lacking sound answers to our pressing questions, and considering Harry's current delicate mental balance, we do not wish to introduce anything that may complicate matters. In the future, should your response be properly explanatory, we are willing to revisit the topic. That will remain conditional on Harry's growth, however, so we cannot speculate on more at this time.

Awaiting your response,

David and Margaret

Thursday, 13 Sep 1989, 19:52

“Well, Harry,” Alison Hale said as she put aside her notebook, “I must say it sounds like you’ve been having a great couple of months.” At five feet six inches, Alison was not quite petite but was light in frame. Her golden hair had a natural set of weak curls that at times frustrated her and at other times she would never willingly give up. Just into her early thirties, she was happy with her married life, her recent decision to start her own family, and her professional career.

Harry, the quiet and kind boy sitting across from her on a settee, gave her one of his rare, open smiles in response. “I think this last trip with Uncle Remus was brilliant!” His boyish enthusiasm was evident, even if Alison thought his response was more muted than a nine-year-old should have had under the circumstances.

“I’m glad, Harry. You certainly deserve some good times, and it sounds like getting to know your parents’ friend even better has done you quite a lot of good. I’m pleased to hear that his letting the garden flat this past year has worked out so well.”

Alison paused to let Harry bask in the reflection of his recent trip to the Yucatan in Mexico with his parents and pseudo-uncle. She knew that she needed to broach a sensitive issue before he left, but it was good to see him truly happy. “Have you thought about what we talked about last time?” Alison was carefully guiding Harry to some topics the boy consistently shied away from, but she had been dealing with recalcitrant characters for a long time now. There was an art to coaxing them into being all they could become. “About some type of exercise classes?”

She had been gently leading him to the problem at the end of each session for months and was carefully increasing the directness of their conversations. “Some kind of physical activity? Running, boxing, fencing, or even gymnastics?”

Harry, per usual as she noted absently, lost his smile and closed up slightly. After almost three full years of therapy, he was blossoming into a genuine, compassionate, and gentle young man. He would probably always have a quiet demeanour and be somewhat reserved, but compared to the condition in which he had first arrived at her



office, she thought his progress was nothing short of phenomenal. Their meetings were now only every other week, and Alison found herself looking forward to them as a reward for the countless long hours of hard work she had put into him.

“Well,” Harry offered slowly, keeping his eyes on his trainers, “I talked to Mum and Dad about it a bit after last time. After asking around for a while, Dad seemed to think he knew of someone that might be just right, and the man, uh, Master Gata, I think, well, he’s coming over this weekend. I dunno. I’m not really comfortable with the idea. I don’t want to hurt someone, you know? But that’s supposed to be what he teaches.”

Alison smiled warmly at Harry, accepting his quiet rambling as one of the more overt signs of extreme discomfort. Harry had shied away from anything physical that was not a solo activity. In school, he flat-out refused to participate in team sports, and at his level, there were no viable alternative options. She had written a letter explaining that he was to be excused from such activities unless he chose to initiate them, and she understood that he spent quite a bit of time reading and working on more cerebral pursuits.

“It’s okay to be afraid, Harry,” she reminded him yet again, “but the idea is to not let your fear stop you from doing something. Fear is healthy. It’s good to experience, but you don’t want to let it rule you. When fear controls you, you can’t control your own life.”

Harry squirmed for a moment on the settee before he finally made eye contact with her again. “I know,” he all but whispered, “but I don’t know that I want to learn how to hurt other people. That’s what this man teaches, not just, well, getting in shape or something.”

Alison paused to consider his situation. Strictly speaking, it was ill-advised to make any physical contact with her patients for a variety of reasons, despite her instincts telling her that Harry really needed some reassurance in that manner. Ultimately, Harry was living in fear of becoming like his relatives had been, she was certain. He had a deeply rooted idea of right and wrong, almost completely separate

from fair and unfair, and he disliked activities that could easily be used in what he felt was the wrong category.

“It is our choices, Harry,” she said with a gentle smile, “that make us what we are. You’ve said in the past that you want to help others, to keep others from suffering unduly. If you really want to work towards that, you’ll have to learn how to help them sooner or later. Sadly, part of their suffering may be from violence, and if you keep in mind why you are doing something, you will not become what you fear. Your heart doesn’t lean that way, Harry, I am quite certain. You do need to develop your physical condition, but that doesn’t mean you need to turn into a bully. I’m sure whatever your father has found will be appropriate for you.”

She watched Harry work through her words for a while and then noticed that it was really time to stop the session for this week. “Harry, be honest with your own self as well. Wouldn’t you feel better about yourself, knowing that no one can hurt you that way again? If this man, if he can teach you to defend yourself while getting you in shape, it sounds like a good thing to me.”

She knew that was a risky statement. The trust necessary for effective therapy stemmed from not only knowing that there was confidentiality, and building up a friendship of some level, but also in never pushing or advocating anything her patients were unready to face.

The first year with Harry had been nothing short of horrifying – meetings twice a week or more. The amount of pain, confusion, and outright damage that had been inflicted on Harry’s personality broke her heart. Her husband was used to her sometimes coming home upset, but that year it had seemed she was crying herself to sleep at least half the nights they held sessions.

By the end of the first year, he was responding to everyone, he was back in school, and he was trying. Children were remarkably resilient, and, in that respect, Harry was no different. When confronted with anger, shouting, or even the merest hint of violence, however, Harry reverted immediately to a withdrawn and emotionally vacant shell. The successive years since that arduous first one had slowly pushed

those worrying traits away, healing what could be healed. At the same time, she had guided him into learning to accept that what had happened and could not be healed was not something Harry deserved or brought upon himself.

To her, the worst moments by far stemmed from attending the evaluation hearings of the Dursley parents, which were essentially status updates in prison. They were not eligible for full parole hearings yet, but the complete psychological assessment from in-prison councillors was compared to her own understanding from working with Harry. She would provide written reports and then testify in person on the sheer volume of abuse and neglect heaped upon their nephew. The photographs of old scars made her nauseous when she saw them at each review. It was always appalling in this day and age to discover that such people still existed and that they still thought they could do as they wished to those entrusted to their care, let alone those of their own flesh and blood. She never understood how anyone thought that having life on their terms, the way they wanted, necessitated such unspeakable physical and mental cruelty or how they could blithely stomach inflicting such pain.

“All right, I’ll try it,” Harry finally offered. Alison was happy to see a hint of the steely resolve she had witnessed when he was intellectually challenged, as it told her he would do whatever challenge was at hand to the best of his ability. There was very little middle ground with Harry. He was either completely dedicated to something or else he had no interest and thus no patience for it.

“I’m glad to hear that, Harry,” she responded, keeping her warm smile in place. “I hope that what you start to learn soon gives you some additional peace of mind. Why don’t you run out to the waiting room and fetch your mum so we can all talk together for a minute?”

Harry gave her that same wry smile she had come to interpret in so many ways, and this one was a classic – the hint of compliance coupled to knowing something she was not privy to, something that would be fun somehow.

As Harry briefly stepped out, Alison made a note to talk to her senior colleagues in the group office. They had offered many suggestions on how to broach the physical recovery to complement the mental recovery, but no one had anticipated it would take so long to actually begin in earnest. Harry's capitulation marked an important step, and she would have to treat it carefully. They would be full of invaluable suggestions on how she might preserve his motivation should the physical conditioning leave Harry uncomfortable.

During the initial interviews, Harry had been in a room with both her and her favourite mentor, a rather kind if somewhat stern-faced woman in her mid-forties. Part of the standard evaluation practice was to present a patient with two possible therapists and see how they reacted to each. Harry had visibly been wary and even afraid of her mentor, while he was always checking Alison visually for her responses to his statements, so she had been given the case. He had shown his preference, though he never knew he was being tested at the time. Given how he had been raised to that point, it was no surprise he had adversely reacted to the seemingly austere woman.

Margaret Kepson walked in, following closely behind Harry. "Alison, it's nice to see you," the woman said as she entered. While Harry closed the door, Margaret pulled out some biscuits wrapped in cellophane and handed them over. "I made these just this morning and saved some for you. They've been buying them up at the store like mad. David's been suggesting we build that commercial kitchen so I can really try my hands out."

Alison laughed as Margaret chuckled wryly, both of them well acquainted with the many hours that Margaret spent cooking. Two years ago, she had started selling some of her more popular pastries in the local markets at Alison's urging. Before that, it had strictly been on a catering word-of-mouth basis. Alison loved receiving the surplus of Margaret's kitchen, as did her husband, but she thought that Margaret had a genuine talent for cooking and had spent the past two years gently persuading the older woman to expand her horizons and clientele.

Harry pulled out a small pack of photos from the bag Margaret carried and slid the stack towards Alison. Curious, she opened the flap to extract half a dozen glossy black and white images. In the first one, Remus and Harry were kneeling in the sand on a beach, a giant sea turtle mere feet from them. "Wow," she breathed softly. "That's incredible. Did you get to touch it?"

Harry shook his head. "No, Remus said we shouldn't disturb them. They were mothers laying their clutches of eggs, and he said that no matter how much we might want to, we shouldn't interfere with the natural order of things unless something was wrong."

Alison nodded slowly as she flipped through the pictures. They had a few close-up shots of the egg nest, and she was left feeling slightly envious that Harry had seen something so exciting. "I think I'm jealous, Harry," she admitted to him as well as herself. "But you definitely deserved a holiday. All that studying you were doing with your uncle was just too much, even if you do claim to enjoy it more than regular school. I'm glad you had a break."

Sliding the pictures back into the envelope, Alison handed the packet back to Harry. "So is there anything we need to discuss, or will I see the two of you next time?" Alison held Margaret's eyes a moment longer than she normally would for other patients' parents, knowing that Harry's adoptive mum sometimes wanted to speak out of his hearing.

"No, Alison," Margaret said with a smile. "It's good to see you. Ready to go, Harry?"

Harry nodded quietly, still clutching the pack of photographs in his left hand. As was their routine, Alison came around and solemnly shook Harry's right hand, and then, on a whim, she ruffled his hair for the first time. "Get going, tiger. I'll see you next time."

The bright smile that Harry had returned would keep her smile in place for the rest of the evening.

Thursday, 13 Sep 1989, 20:14

“Let’s hurry up, Harry. I want to get home and have some of that new coffee David said he was bringing home. It’s a new line at the store.” Margaret kept one hand on Harry’s shoulder, gently guiding him across the street and down toward their Vauxhall sedan. There was some kind of event going on at the big shopping centre just up the road, and she had been forced to hunt for a parking spot for longer than normal.

As the two turned into the side alley where their car was parked, a gust of wind blew along and swept a few rank odours to her nostrils. It was a warm evening for the coast, quite pleasant, but sometimes the revellers got a bit carried away and gave up hunting for a proper loo. She always tried to park on the main streets to avoid such things, but that was not always possible.

“D’you think Remus will be back yet?” Harry asked, trudging along with the packet of photographs still in hand. She smiled warmly at the thought of Harry leading Remus everywhere they went, asking questions non-stop about the why of everything he found. Remus had quietly and efficiently wormed his way into all their hearts and lives, and she knew that his appearance and later guidance were responsible in no small part for Harry’s improvement these past years.

“He did say he would be back tonight. Apparently that pen-pal of his, Mr Flamel, decided that there was something interesting in all those letters full of questions.” Margaret knew that Harry was curious about the reclusive Nicolas Flamel, although at David’s and Margaret’s urging they had asked Remus not to tell Harry everything about the man. It was hard enough to deal with the past lives of her two favourite boys – or rather, wolf and boy – and then there was the discovery that magic was real.

She was keeping it a secret that when she had rung David up at the store before heading to the session with Alison, he mentioned receiving a note that morning telling him that not only would Remus be home that night, but that he was bringing both of the Flamels with him.

Harry chuckled slightly. "Well, it was funny when he tried to Summon the teapot and turned the clock into a half-toad, half-snake."

Margaret pulled Harry close and gave him a warm, one-armed hug. She loved to hear him laugh for any reason at all. Those first months had been so painful, so frustrating, that she despaired this young man might never smile again. "Yes, Harry, it was funny, but I think the best part was his expression."

"' Allo, luv, what's this?"

The sudden looming figure brought Margaret to an immediate halt, mere yards from their car. She pulled Harry firmly against her side with her left hand, clutching her purse close with her right. "I beg your pardon?" she asked in a tight voice.

"' Ere, now, none o' that. You just be giving me that purse, an' I'll be about my business, yeah?" The man held a long gleaming knife that reflected the dull glow of the streetlamps. Margaret was horrified to realise she was about to be mugged, of all things, with Harry right beside her.

She could feel Harry begin to tremble slightly under her left hand, but she knew better than to argue. If she gave him her wallet, she would be out some money, but they would be left alone. Harry would be okay.

She pulled Harry firmly back against her and reached with her left hand toward the purse to extract her wallet, but the man in front of her appeared to misunderstand. "I said, give it over!" He took a half step forward, the knife suddenly extended at them rather than straight up.

"I'm getting my wallet, please, we'll not –" her words were cut off as the man lunged forward and grabbed the purse from her. Harry was beginning to shake violently, and Remus had warned them that when Harry was overstressed, strange things would happen. His own magic would demand release, and without full training, anything was possible. The fact that magic itself seemed to not work in quite the

right way at the house had left Remus backing up and re-working all the theory behind magic itself. Remus had kept Harry working just on principles and the limited training Remus felt he could safely devise while they tried to sort it all out, while also avoiding the detection of the Ministry of Magic.

The man upended the bag on the sidewalk, scattering her cosmetics and growling at the meagre contents. "You're holding out on me, aren't you, luv?"

It was evident to Margaret that whatever she had assumed, she was incorrect. The man reeked of alcohol, and she was suddenly terrified for what Harry was about to witness.

As the man kicked the contents of her bag into the gutter, he stood up straight and held the knife low, directly at her navel. She could faintly see the stained teeth as he leered and took another step toward them.

"No!" Harry pulled out of her arms, stepping fully in front of her. "Leave us alone!" With one sharp jabbing hand motion on Harry's part, there was a bright flash of light and intense pain.

Their assailant was knocked back some ten feet, while Harry stood in front of her, hands extended as though prepared to fight and protect them. How she loved her boy. She could see something dark glistening on the left side of his neck, and her chest felt cold, or hot, so very cold and hot.

The man got to his feet and took one long look at them before turning and running off. When Harry sagged in relief and turned to face her, she was wondering why she had to look up at him from the ground. "Harry?" Her own voice sounded faint to her ears, which were filled with some dull roaring sound in the background.

Harry dropped to his feet and stared at something sticking out of her chest. It was so hot, so cold, so empty, and Harry was yelling something. She needed to comfort him, like when he had those horrible nightmares, but it was so hard to move. "It will be all right, Harry," she whispered, "your mum is here now."



She struggled to remember when the street had become so very, very dark.

Tue, 21 Sep 1995, 04:33

Harry was out of bed, moving into stance, both wands glowing brightly, harshly breathing before he realised that he was at Hogwarts, the silent room fully lit. He had fallen asleep in his clothes after staring at that damnable mirror, and he could feel his heart pounding in fury and impotence.

Aside from the sound of his lungs pumping too hard, the room was calm. Nothing moved. The mirror continued to reflect what was there, while Floppy was sprawled across the pillows. His broom and bag were still laid upon his desk, and his boots were still firmly secured. There were no opponents, no battles to be fought. There was only an empty room and his reflection in glass.

Harry slowly lowered his arms as he regarded the silence of the room. Unlike his home, there existed a complete void of background humming, of central heat and air, of electronic devices to light up the night or emit a faint yet incessant high-pitched whine, and it was all slightly surreal. With the realisation that nothing was changing no matter the desires of the moment, Harry sank onto the edge of the bed and tried to clear his mind. The graduated series of breathing exercises and profound quiet helped, although in some ways the latter was mildly disconcerting.

With a sigh, Harry got to his feet before collecting a change of clothes and heading for the shower. He knew that sleep would evade him for the rest of the morning, and, as he had to meet Ginny shortly, there was little point in pretending to flirt with Morpheus. A long, hot shower would help him find his balance to face another day.

Once Harry returned, feeling at least marginally under control, he finished dressing and securing his boots. As a matter of course, once his boot-laces, belt, and clothes were fully in place and cinched tight, he rapidly cast several silent Colloresus Charms. In the same family as the door-sealing Colloportus Charm, the end result was that each

boot moulded into one seamless piece, as did his belt, his shirt and trousers.

Releasing the protections and wards on his trunk, Harry carefully moved things around until he extracted his old outgrown dragon-hide armour. Setting that on the bed, Harry replaced the other contents back into the trunk, pausing only to open his Transporter Box. Harry was slightly surprised to see a note in there, given that he was unaware of any scheduled events that might warrant communication before his regular visit home. Flipping the note on top of the piled armour, Harry sealed the Transporter Box and then his trunk, reactivating all the protection layers.

Glancing at his watch, Harry realised he had only a few minutes before he was due to meet Ginny. The note he had received was clearly penned in Remus' hand, yet it had none of the markings indicating urgency. Trying not to think about whatever contents may lurk inside, Harry stuffed the note into his trouser pocket and headed for the door out of the suite.

"Mr Potter!" Floppy's voice called from behind him.

Harry paused in the middle of the common area within the suite. "What is it, Floppy?"

"You're not leaving without me, now are you?"

Harry sighed in resignation, debating internally about how much he wanted to talk with the Hat at the moment. "Does it matter? You're either silent or badgering me over something, and you've already scanned my memories."

"A deal is a deal, Mr Potter. You agreed to continue wearing me until you're Sorted properly. I still think that time has not come, and that decision is mine to make, and mine alone."

Realising that it was pointless to argue with a hat, let alone this Hat, Harry reluctantly fetched Floppy and tossed him over one shoulder. "Wearing comes in many forms, Floppy. Maybe I'll try you out as a

sock.” Once again Harry made his way toward the Gryffindor common room, carrying the armour for Ginny to wear.

“Really, Mr Potter, are you so afraid of being open that you must always resort to such petty threats?”

Harry stopped once more in the middle of the suite’s common area. “And just what the hell is that about, Floppy? Being open? Did I or did I not let you scan my memories?”

“You let me see them, yes, yet you refuse to talk or think about them. Just how long do you plan to have your head in the sand, Mr Potter?”

“What?!” For some reason, the Hat’s patronizing tone was grating on Harry’s nerves. “If you’d actually try talking and not Dumbdoring about something, then maybe you’d get more satisfaction in life!”

“And just what is it about the Headmaster that you fear so?”

“Fear? Him? Ha!” Harry snorted in derision. “That’s right up there with fearing an unknown Riddle!”

“But you do, Mr Potter, on both counts. You and I both know that’s true.”

“I don’t fear old man Tom!” Harry was unable to stop the snarl from escaping. Whatever gains he had made since waking up were quickly disappearing, and he knew it. “And I’ll be damned if I’ll fear that old man in the hospital wing either!”

With an irrational burst of anger, Harry flung Floppy off his shoulder and onto the floor. Without pausing to think further, he stormed out of the suite and down the hall. The Fat Lady was sleeping soundly, but Harry paid her no mind as he poked her abruptly in the gut. “Wake up!”

The Fat Lady fell out of her chair, startled and swearing. As she slowly clambered to her feet, she shook her head and glared at Harry. "What was –"

Harry was in no mood to listen to a painting. "Patronus!"

With a screech of protest from the occupant, the portrait swung open even as the Fat Lady let loose a stream of archaic epithets and commentary about Harry's lack of manners that would have made Sirius chuckle. Harry ignored her as he climbed through the opening and into the common room, flicking his wand in irritation at one of the great fireplaces. The cold chamber flared brightly as his overpowered Incendio triggered the Ever-Burn Charm to full power.

The resulting wave of heat washed over him as the bright light illuminated the common room in a bizarre and almost macabre way, but Harry was far too irritated to care. Throwing the armour on a sofa, he slammed himself into a chair and tried to get his breathing and thinking back under control. He had only been sitting for a brief moment before there was a loud crack!, and Floppy was firmly ensconced on his head.

"I'll overlook your treatment of the Fat Lady, Mr Potter, but A Deal is A Deal." So saying, the Hat went limp and drooped down over his right ear, much like it had the night of his so-called Sorting.

Grinding his teeth in fury, Harry fought the extreme temptation to chuck the Hat into the burning fire when an audible clomping of feet made him turn around.

Not realising how apparent his seething anger was, he turned to watch Ginny stop in mid-step, her sleepy countenance suddenly nervous and uncertain as she backed up to the foot of the staircase. Harry pointed peremptorily at the mound of armour lying untidily on the sofa. "Go put that on." He could tell his voice was frosty, but that was a problem for another time. At the moment, he needed to leash his emotions.

Ginny made no effort to move. She simply stood there regarding Harry as he struggled to get his mind in one place. At last, she

cautiously walked towards the sofa, hands thrust deep into her trouser pockets while she kept her eyes glued to Harry. She may have been sleepy when she came down the stairs, but it was obvious now that she was anything but.

Harry closed his eyes and turned his face toward the fire, starting the relaxation sequence over with First Breathing exercises. He ignored the sounds of Ginny picking up the armour and climbing back up the stairs.

When the silence had continued long enough that he was relatively certain Ginny was otherwise occupied, he blew out a slow breath. "I don't need this crap right now, Floppy." Harry was proud that his voice was almost even keeled.

"The problem, Mr Potter, is that by the time you realise that you do need this crap, it will be far too late to be of use."

Barely registering the sound of his teeth grinding viciously, Harry twitched as he once more suppressed the urge to chuck the Hat into the fire. "Spit it out, then, or else shut up."

"I have warned you, Mr Potter, that you are on a slippery slope. None will be able to catch you if you fall. You must understand yourself before you may move forward safely."

"What the bloody hell does that mean? Understand yourself?" Harry snorted in a mixture of antipathy and jaded humour. "I'll just step out for a couple of months to chat myself up and let old Riddle have his way in the interim, shall I?"

"You revel in extremism, Mr Potter, when you know perfectly well that reality is not so easily boxed."

"You haven't answered my question!" Harry shot back with enough vehemence that he realised he should switch to non-verbal communications lest random Gryffindors learn more than they ought. Understand what? I understand perfectly well! Either I take down that

idiot, or he'll take me down! Either way, it's hell in a hand basket to get to our mutual date with fate! What else is there for me?

There is far more to life than conflict, Mr Potter. Focusing entirely on one goal to the exclusion of all else is not healthy, wise, or safe.

And just what the hell would you recommend I do? Spend some quality time in front of that mirror?! Even communicating mentally, Harry knew that Floppy would more than catch the complete disdain he was feeling about their entire conversation. Or maybe I should contact Riddle and just tell him: Sorry, I'm confused, exactly why are you trying to kill me again? No, wait, even better, I can drop him a line and offer to let him have Britain if I can have Italy. That's fair, right? He gets London, and I get Rome. We're both alive. What's not to like in that deal?

I would recommend that you stop pushing your agenda so hard, Mr Potter. You need to see the consequences of your actions to yourself as well as to others.

Harry's snort was audible this time. "Right, let me just add that to list. 'Sorry, before I kill your sorry arse, Tom my friend, I need to decide how I'm going to feel about it all. Do just sit in the corner over there while I work that little detail out, would you?' That is what you want me to do, Floppy?"

Are you aware that Miss Weasley is presently watching you with some concern?

Harry spun in place and saw Ginny standing halfway between the staircase and his spot in front the fire. "Bugger," he muttered.

"Err, good morning to you, too, Harry." Ginny's voice was neither teasing nor welcoming. Rather, she seemed to prefer the kind of tone one would use when approaching a complete stranger.

"Good for you, maybe," Harry said darkly. "Let's go." With a jerk of his head, Harry began walking toward the portrait, doing his best not to stomp.

“Uh, Harry?” The overt uncertainty in her voice made him pause and, once again, vainly try to find some level of mental balance. “I’ve, uh, never worn armour before. Is it right?”

Harry closed his eyes and tried counting to ten, then twenty, and then he simply tried breathing deeply before he turned back around. “Look,” he offered finally, knowing his voice was somewhat cooler than it should be, “this isn’t about you. I’m sorry I’m a little ... curt ... this morning. I’ve just got a few things weighing on my mind. Right?” Receiving a slow nod in response, Harry walked over to Ginny, doing his best to ignore her shifting from foot to foot as he got within arm’s length.

Harry paused to take in her outfit. He could see the rumples of the armour bunched in a few places, but she was wearing a long-sleeved shirt and trousers that both fit reasonably well over the dragon hide. Her boots appeared to be new, as did her clothes, and were probably the ones that Remus picked up for her at Harry’s prior request. All in all, she was dressed rather similarly to how he was. “Right. It’s a bit too big for you, but it’ll do for you to get used to wearing it. When do you see Remus next?”

Ginny kept her eyes on the floor as she answered. “He said that today he’d be busy with something important. He said he would let me know via owl in the next day or two about a regular schedule. He, uh, gave me some things to read. Like I haven’t got enough between lessons, that theory book, and then the legal stuff, he has to add to it all.”

Harry sighed and moved behind her. “Knowledge is power, Ginny, and what you’re beginning to learn now is all the way up at the top of that scale. If you get swamped, let one of us know, and we’ll help you out. Now, take a deep breath.”

Harry took a minute to push her plait out of the way as he pulled the armour across her shoulders as tight as the pieces would go, and then bunched the excess armour into a tight handle at the base of her neck. Keeping one hand in place there, he tugged and cinched the side straps until there was a long bubble of excess material running

the length of her spine. Ginny shifted a bit as he pulled it tight, almost jumping when he got it too tight in certain areas. The shoulders were obviously too loose, the chest was about right, and the waist needed the most reduction. Since it was a non-uniform adjustment to resize the armour, Harry was uncertain he could fix it properly. "Sorry, Ginny. I can't fix this and not risk ruining the armour."

Blowing his breath out slowly, he was pleased that he was beginning to get his frustration under control. Floppy going silent was doing wonders for his mental balance. Releasing the armour, Harry walked back around to face the redhead. "Send a note to Remus, tell him you need the armour resized and that it's beyond my confidence to get it right. He'll know who to drag along to fix it up. Tonks, probably, since you already met her in the infirmary the other night."

Harry glanced over her outfit one more time, trying to decide what it changed about her appearance that made him feel more secure in his decision to train her. Deciding it was probably just the fact she was dressed like she could survive if she got in a fight, Harry nodded his head back toward the portrait. "I expect to see you dressed like that every day from now on. Some people will train you in funny clothes or no boots or whatever, but that's a mistake. You have to learn how to fight in what you'll actually wear day to day. We're going to solve that problem by changing your wardrobe, and then you're always ready to go. Once you know how to fight in that, you can add other clothes back in."

Harry paused as he let Ginny exit the portrait before him. As soon as he stepped through, however, the Fat Lady began yelling at him. Harry raised one eyebrow at her paltry ability to impart modern invective and just walked on, leaving Ginny to hurry along in his wake as the archaic character attacks trailed off.

"What did you do to her?"

"Woke her up without the tea and biscuits and pretty-pleases."

Ginny sighed softly. "You know, Harry, it wouldn't kill you to be nice to people."



“And it won’t kill people to hear facts, either, without the fluff.”

Ginny said nothing as they walked along one corridor after another. As they passed the Headmaster’s staircase, Harry was amused to see the gargoyle give him a very flat look.

“Did that gargoyle just ... ?”

“Yeah,” Harry said quietly as they walked along. “I think the fellow’s decided to hold a grudge, even if it was an accident.”

“I don’t want to know, really,” Ginny said as she continued to walk along, hands in pockets and eyes down.

“Right. Lesson One. Look up.” Ginny looked over at Harry, but he simply placed one hand on her jaw and gently but forcibly turned her face forward. “You walk around looking at the floor all the time, like lots of people here do. It makes you weak, it makes your demeanour vulnerable, and it leaves you half-way defeated before you even start.”

Harry took his hand back but kept up his commentary. “Look outward. Make eye contact. Sweep your eyes from side to side. Look for where people could hide. Look for what might be ready to leap out and attack. Remember what’s around you – furniture, people, things you can pick up or hide behind. Look for people unwilling to meet your gaze or for people that look in your eyes slightly too long. All of these are risks or tools, and you need to be ready to move and defend yourself. Looking down denies you all of this.”

As they reached the main thoroughfare, he began to think longingly of the broom he had left back in his suite. “Some people think that if they can’t see you, you can’t see them. That’s stupid. If you can’t see them, then they will certainly kill you before you even know you’re in danger.” Harry realised there was a certain ironic justice to the statement given the events of the summer past. He was quite determined to not make the same mistake twice.

“So where are we going, then?”

“You’ll see. This is one of my secrets to be kept from others, though, right?” Ginny nodded at him, to which he gave her a weak smile in response, but she was already looking back out and around.

By the time they arrived outside the corridor to the Come and Go Room, Harry thought Ginny was just starting to become used to the idea of looking up as she walked. She almost had a smile on her face and kept looking around the long corridor, or glancing over towards the staircase down. “Wait here a moment. Let me get the room set up.”

Leaving a slightly puzzled redhead behind him, he carefully paced back and forth while swinging his wand dramatically, muttering nonsense. He knew that the wand and words had nothing to do with it, but he was unwilling to share the secret of the room with her as yet. It would do as a training room, though, until things were well settled. He just wanted to obfuscate the access mechanism for a while.

When the door finally appeared, Harry opened it and glanced inside. Seeing the training room he had previously summoned, he waved Ginny in and then followed her in before closing and sealing the door with a quick Colloportus. After he layered Proximity and Imperturbable Charms on the door and wall facing into the hallway, he turned to see Ginny staring around with open surprise.

“What is this place?”

“I’ll have to tell you that some other time. Maybe in a few weeks.” Harry gestured for her to walk into the room. “Today, we’re going to fix the real problem you have. We’ll call this Lesson Two.”

As Ginny stood in the middle of the room, Harry paced, collecting his thoughts and ignoring her visually tracking him. “You want to know how to fight. That’s all wrong, really. There are three things you need to realise. First, you need some physical conditioning to have endurance and raw strength. Second, you need some training to learn how to use that endurance and strength in the right way. Both of

these are easily solved with plain hard work on your part. We'll get to those things later, but the really big one is your attitude."

Harry pointed at the weapons racked on the wall. "Those are weapons to you, right?" At Ginny's nod, he held up one of his wands. "As is this?" Again she nodded, her face neutral. "So you'd say the same for my fist or feet?" As she nodded for the third time, Harry shook his own head in turn.

"None of these are weapons, Ginny. They are tools. It's your mind that makes them a weapon. Tell me the name of the spell you think is the least weapon-like – something that you think couldn't be used in an attack at all."

Ginny narrowed her eyes as she stared at Harry. "Why?"

Harry offered her a wry smile. "We're going to play a game. You're going to try to attack me, and I'm going to stop you using the spell you pick. So, what'll it be?"

Ginny kept her eyes narrowed as she regarded Harry for a long, silent moment. "The Cushioning Charm, I'd have to say."

Harry grinned. "Right. That's what it'll be, then." Harry held up one wand. "Your mission is to disarm me, to take away my 'weapon,' and I'll only use this one wand. You can use magic, physical force, both, whatever you like. I'll not even try to fight you off, unless it's using that one spell. Right?"

Ginny had a wolfish smile on her face. "You're making this awfully easy if you're not going to fight back except with that charm, Harry."

Harry's answering smile had the intended effect, based on what Neville had told him previously, when Ginny's own smile disappeared and she took a nervous half-step backward. "Begin when you feel like it, Ginevra."

Almost as though that last word had been a match to a powder keg, the redhead neatly leapt at him in one surprisingly fluid motion. Before she could take a second step, however, Harry had silently

cast the Cushioning Charm right in front of where her foot would land. When her foot landed on the wobbly surface, she went sprawling across the floor. Her uncontrolled tumble quickly left her falling off the edge of the cushioned area and onto the wooden floor with a thump. Harry ignored her fall and continued to cast the charm in a precise pattern between them.

As she gamely got back to her feet and got her bearings, Harry continued his project to place an entire stack of Cushioning Charms on top of each other. Ginny's gaze locked onto the space separating them, and it was obvious she was trying to decide exactly where Harry was casting the spell as she shifted about somewhat nervously. While she was focusing and thinking, Harry kept building the stack higher, placing each one slightly closer to Ginny. He ignored the bead of sweat forming on his brow as his rapid-fire casting came to a close.

To his vision, it was trivial to see the exact shape and size of each one, thereby enabling him to stack them rather high. Since each cushioned region was approximately five feet by five feet, and one foot thick, the final tower was around fifteen feet tall when he stopped to consider whether he should build another tower next to it. Before he could make up his mind, however, Ginny decided to act instead of watching him.

With a face of sheer determination, Ginny levelled her wand and cast a loud "Finite Incantatem!" When the space between them flared brightly as one Cushioning Charm near the bottom of the stack vanished, Harry shot her a smirk and yawned theatrically at her. Her second spell, a bright "Stupefy!" obviously aimed for his chest, impacted another charm and actually caused it to shatter as he watched, twirling his wand slowly.

The entire stack teetered for a split second, seriously unbalanced from the two lost pieces and the uneven weight distribution, so Harry waved bye-bye in a child-like manner before watching the entire pile fall on top of the redhead. She was pinned for a moment under some of the Cushioning Charms that had come to rest across her legs, her back forcibly raised up from another charm that she partially fell on top of, and Harry thought it looked to be quite an uncomfortable position. Harry saw that her wand was just out of reach and under a

third charm. He was amused to see her repeatedly reach for the wand, only to find her hand mired in the charm above it, before she gave up and tried to lift the charm off her legs.

She was still laboriously trying to get a hand-hold on the invisible region of the charm when Harry just shook his head slowly. "You know you'd be dead by now, right?"

When Ginny glared at him, Harry just waved his hands in mock defeat and then cast repeated silent Finites on the Cushioning Charms scattered about.

After Ginny grabbed her wand and rolled back to her feet, she stood there regarding him in silence. Harry was certain that she was becoming irritated, which, in his opinion, could only be a good thing. Harry shot her another grin along with a wink. "Giving up already, Ginevra?" he asked in an overly polite voice, obviously mocking her.

In the blink of an eye, she flicked her wand at him as she began to rattle off a hex he had never heard before.

Harry almost negligently cast the Cushioning Charm on her head, immediately silencing her as she dropped her wand and began trying to claw at her throat. It was obvious she was unable to breathe, but she was also unable to touch her face or throat no matter how much effort she put into it. With the charm fully in place and folded around her head and upper torso, Harry began a slow count to sixty. He kept a close eye on her actions, wanting to be sure she was pushed to near panic without completely succumbing to the sensation.

At first, she was frantically trying to lift the invisible material, but was facing the same problem she had with reclaiming her wand. Then she tried moving it aside, but that did not work either. She had fallen to her knees, but was still fighting to get the material away from her face. As he neared thirty-five in his count, her colour was peaking, and he knew she was firmly out of air and was starting to fully grasp the danger. Before, it had been simply been an intellectual exercise and simple surprise, but now she understood how precarious everything really was.

He reached forty-one before he thought she was ready to reach the panic state. Her aura had steadily grown brighter as her emotional state regressed to animalistic urges, and it was pulsing slightly, a sure precursor to an accidental discharge. With a flick and a silent Finite!, Harry released the charm.

Ginny slumped to the floor, the action suddenly loud in the room as she panted heavily and rested her forehead on the ground.

Harry inspected his wand while she regained her composure. He knew precisely how unnerving it was to find yourself unable to breathe without warning, and he would never fault anyone for their immediate reaction to the first-time experience. When she finally looked up at him, he could see the glint of true anger in her eyes.

“What the hell was that, Harry?”

Harry gave her a half-shrug, half-smile. “Cushioning Charm cast on your head.”

“Okay,” she said as she got to her feet slowly, fetching her wand along the way. “Let me ask that another way. Why did that happen?”

“You neglected to learn the lesson of the stacked charms. They have volume, and gravity affects them.” Harry tapped his chin with his wand tip for a moment as he tried to think of the best way to answer the question. “You have to understand how something works before you can really know how to use it properly. That charm basically makes the air move very slowly, kind of like a fluid, right? But it’s still flexible when you hit it really hard, because it isn’t actually a fluid, it’s more like a pillow in some ways.” Harry stopped for a minute to pace around.

The problem was that the magical world lacked the vocabulary and innate understanding of first principles to make any explanation coherent. “If you understood Muggle physics, it would be easier to explain this. The air inside the charm is almost glued together into a big block, and it doesn’t separate easily. The net effect is that it’s far too thick to truly breathe, so casting that on your head allowed it to

settle around your face, impeding the surrounding air too – your lungs just aren't strong enough to break the charm apart to let normal air pass. But you also learned how hard it is to reach through one. Imagine casting that on an opponent's wand once you have it away from them, eh?"

Ginny said nothing as she continued to watch Harry, but he was fairly certain she was thinking about what he had said. "Now. What mistakes did you make, Ginny?"

Ginny shook her head slowly but answered anyway. "I'm not entirely sure, but I think I didn't try to attack you quickly enough."

"True to a point," Harry offered. "But you're never going to always be the one to attack first. Don't rely on being first to draw and hex, or you'll lose. What else?"

"I didn't account for what you could do with the charm."

"Yes. But that's because you didn't take the danger seriously. Did you?"

Ginny shook her head in silence. Harry was pleased to see that she was showing no embarrassment, only some frustration.

"Okay, Ginny, there are two more small things and one major one. Little things first. Number one, you let your anger get to you. You reacted to my taunting, rather than having a clear plan of attack. When you let your emotions control your reaction, well, things usually don't go very well." Harry paused until Ginny nodded her acquiescence slowly.

"Second, you were throwing single attacks. If you're going to attack, then attack. You don't stand still. You keep moving. You keep attacking. You throw spells, fists, whatever you have until your opponent is down, and you're certain they are incapacitated – no guesses involved. If you toss off a spell and then wait for a response, you're dead already. A real opponent isn't going to trade volleys with

you. A real opponent is going to start and only stop when you're a bloody ruin on the floor."

Harry slowly tapped his forehead. "But your biggest problem is that you had a failure of imagination. You think there are weapons and not-weapons. Everything is a weapon, Ginny, be it a spoon, a mitten, or a pile of leaves. The deadliest weapon that exists is the one between your ears. I can train you physically. I can help you understand what every spell does. But I can't make your imagination work, Ginny. Only you can do that."

Ginny seemed to lose some of the ground she had gained, her eyes downcast as she shifted uncertainly from one foot to another.

"Chin up, Ginny. Look out. Look for opponents. Lesson One, right?" When her head snapped up and her eyes flashed fire, Harry wondered if he had misunderstood her earlier reaction. "I can't teach you imagination, but I can force you to use it."

"Oh?" Her tone was clearly challenging, if a bit quieter than he would have expected.

"We're going to duel." Ginny's complexion rapidly became a good facsimile of a pale sheet. "Not like that. Every morning, we're going to train like today, and the first exercise will be what we just did in reverse. I'm going to assign you a spell. You will defend yourself and attack me using only that one spell. Clear?"

At her sharp nod, Harry smiled widely. "Excellent. Tomorrow, you will use Scourgify. You might want to read up on it sometime today, maybe even try to figure out what it really does and how it works."

Harry gestured for Ginny to come closer. With a quick bit of work, he conjured a fake wand of plain oak. "Put your wand away. We're going to stop with magical training and start to work on the physical and mental bits that don't need it.'

When Ginny was within arm's reach, Harry tucked his wand away and held up the fake wand between them. "Let's assume you've



made it this close to me. I'm about to cast a Killing Curse or whatever. You don't want to let my wand point at you. Your only goal is to stop me. Clear?"

When she nodded, Harry shot her a smile as he slowly began to move his arm as though he was going to cast a spell. More or less as expected, Ginny lunged out and wrapped her left hand around the base of the wand just above his right hand, while her right hand grabbed his left wrist. She applied quite a bit of force to push the wand back and away as Harry simply resisted her efforts for a moment.

After he decided a few seconds had passed in the tension of her pushing and his resisting, Harry merely let go of the wand. He shot his left hand out to break her grip on his wrist, pulling her slightly off balance as she stumbled forward from the unexpected lack of resistance. Simultaneously, Harry brought his right forearm up under her chin, and then he finished his motion as he raised his right arm up whilst taking a half step forward, bringing the arm back down as he moved.

Ginny's chin, trapped inside Harry's right elbow, involuntarily shot straight up and backward in a perfect parabolic arc, forcing her body to sit down hard on the wood floor as her head moved backward and her vestibular system gave her no choices.

Before she could react to the sudden change in scenery, Harry had calmly used his reversed grip on her right wrist as a pivot to drive her arm to full extension. He then applied gentle pressure across the back of her elbow with his own, causing a faint hyperextension and thereby rolling her shoulder into the ground and forcing her to lie down. As she lay on her stomach and uttered a soft cry of pain, Harry kept her extended arm trapped in his hands, his left elbow maintaining the pressure on the back of her right elbow just shy of true hyperextension.

"Ah yes, the sound of a lesson being learned," Harry offered conversationally. He kept the pressure on her elbow just short of excruciating. "Never focus on a perceived weapon to the exclusion of all else."

Stepping back, Harry released her arm and let her roll over and glare at him from the ground. “Ginny, you did exactly what most people do. You tried to control the weapon, but you spent everything you had on the effort – your strength, your concentration, everything. It never occurred to you I might just let you have it, since that single moment of recovery for you was all I needed to completely take you out. Even worse, if I had held a knife in my left hand, I could have buried it in you, and you’d never have seen it coming.”

Harry held out a hand to the redhead, and she accepted it although with clear reluctance. After he hauled her back to her feet, he just smiled wryly. “So when your opponent tries to wrest something away from you, let them have it after a token struggle. Then relocate their groin into their throat with a well placed kick or something.”

Ginny’s eyebrows nearly shot into her hairline. “What if it’s a woman?”

Harry chuckled darkly for a moment. “I’ve been advised that when you kick someone there properly, it makes no difference. And now that you’re wearing those spiffy steel-toe boots, trust me, any kick that lands on the groin is going to be a proper one.”

Ginny smiled faintly as she rubbed her right arm. “Right. I’ll bear that in mind, Harry.”

“You do that.” Harry had visions of Tonks and her lessons in his brain for a moment before he shook himself back to the situation. “Okay, so have you started to understand the mental parts yet?”

Ginny switched her focus and rubbed at the shoulder he had pinned to the ground for a moment before she looked back at him. “I think so. I’m still not imagining things that might happen or things to do.”

“Sort of, but that’s just lack of experience. The best part is, experience is a sharp teacher, and pain is your friend. Pain drills in all kinds of lessons very quickly.” As he guided her back to the centre of the wooden floor, Harry gave her his best wolfish smile. “And

speaking of pain, it's time to start teaching you how to physically train. That means warm-ups, stretching, exercising, and then the fun stuff – stances, techniques, and all that. Ready?"

Tue, 21 Sep 1995, 07:16

The Great Hall was still mostly empty when Fred and George dropped into the seats across from Harry and the slumped form of Ginny. Harry was assembling a breakfast of random items, while Ginny was primarily muttering under her breath, her head resting on her crossed forearms, much to Harry's amusement. He had already placed three water pitchers in front of her, and she had skipped the goblet completely for the first few moments as she drained one in a veritable bath. When she had finally come up for air, he had cast a quick Drying Charm on her clothes, which she refused to acknowledge, instead dropping back into a slumped wreck.

"Oi, what did you do to our sister this time?" Fred leaned over the table to lift up Ginny's head. When she glared at him, he hastily sat back down and held both hands up. "Just making sure you were alive!"

Ginny promptly dropped her head back onto her folded arms as Harry winked at the twins. "I was giving Ginny an education in how to use her imagination, as it were. I thought she needed some secure, risk-free lessons."

"What do you mean, teaching her to use her imagination?" George looked quite curious. "If you want unconventional evil, you're sitting across from it right now, young Harry. You should recognise our evil genius."

"Oh?" Harry smiled widely at the twins. "All I've seen out of you two is a bit of potions work that not even a child would fall for if they had a decent education."

Ginny looked up at that, albeit rather wearily and with a precarious tilt to one side, but quickly enough to join Harry in the spectacle of the twins glowering ominously and turning a dark red. "You know,

George,” Fred offered quietly, “I do believe that our skills have been called into question.”

“Quite.” George gave a decisive nod. “It seems that Harry needs to learn who thinks most outlandishly and can devise the most surprises.”

Before Harry could say anything, Ginny whistled quietly. “You two really are something, aren’t you? If you can outwit Harry, I’ll publicly worship you for a day!” Having divulged the contents of her mind, she slumped back into a pile on the table and resumed her faint muttering.

Harry offered a benign smile to the twins as they looked at the back of their sister’s head in consternation. “Don’t mind her. She had a close encounter with a Cushioning Charm earlier, but she didn’t like that soft, comforting feeling.” Harry patted Ginny’s shoulder in mock sympathy. “There, there, ickle Gin-Gin, it’ll all be a distant memory soon enough. Someday you’ll even thank me for it.”

Without thinking about it, Harry caught Ginny’s hand that lashed out to clearly slap his face. Placing it back on the table, he kept a firm grip on it so that she was unable to strike out a second time. The force she was putting into trying to extricate her arm was considerable. “I’m glad to see you still have some energy in your arms. We’ll work more on those tomorrow.” Harry ignored the groan that emitted from the girl, releasing his grip on her as she became passive again. “It’s all in the mind, Ginny. Speaking of minds, Fred and George, what’s your agenda against Hogwarts for today?”

“Against Hogwarts, Harry?” Fred offered with a cool tone. “Don’t you mean against you?”

Harry shrugged. “So you claim, yet I’ve seen very little. You’ve had much better luck in your works against the others.”

George looked flat-out irritated. “Again with the insults. True genius takes time. It’s not something to be rushed by impatient youths.”

“Really?” Harry smiled wickedly. “So your protestations aren’t a cover for being here so early or what’s on the table, then?”

“There’s nothing on the table, Harry. What are you on about?”

Harry had to hand it to the twins. They were very good at acting, most likely from years of practice of talking their way out of some spot of trouble. “The jam pots between us have something added to them, and whatever it is, it’s got your sticky signatures all over it.”

Fred stared with surprise while George just frowned. “How’d you figure that out, Harry?”

Meanwhile, Ginny was looking up at Harry. “That’s why you told me to lay off the toast this morning?”

Harry waved off both questions, nodding instead toward the middle of the Head Table. Using his wand, he cast a quick Switching Charm to swap their collection of pots for the ones there. “There you go, Gin-Gin. Now you can have all the toast you like.”

Fred’s eyes narrowed, much in the same way that Ginny’s had. “You know that they are going to blame us. Very clever, Harry. How do you know we only modified the one set of pots?”

Harry just gave them his best smile. “That’s what makes it all so much fun, right? You’re guessing. I’m guessing. Why, no one knows what’s going to happen next. You could even say it’s all a trade secret.”

Looks of unholy glee crossed Fred and George’s faces, and then George hauled his bag onto the table. Ginny slowly sat up, leaning precariously on one arm rather than one hand as she dragged the small blackberry jam pot next to her plate. When George brought out a copy of 1001 Charms For Hairstyling, however, she abruptly choked on the toast she was eating and Harry had to clap her on the back a couple of times.

“What are you doing with that?” Ginny demanded in a watery voice.

Fred and George made a great show of looking about before they nodded briefly. George opened the cover and held it up so that Harry and Ginny could see the contents.

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Section ...

“Nice,” Harry offered. “How’d you hear about that, then?”

Fred leaned over to continue the air of drama and mystery. With a second exaggerated sweep of the surrounding vacant seats, his voice came out in a whisper. “No clue.”

George was thumbing through the catalogue, but he chimed in anyway. “Just showed up a few days back. There was a note saying we had been recommended as potential clientele and that we should keep silent about it except to our, er, what was it?”

“Co-conspirators,” Fred said promptly, “which, if anyone, would be you two and Lee.”

Harry smiled as Fred began assembling a breakfast plate. “Mind if I look through it?”

George looked up with his own sly smile. “Maybe later, Harry. After your surrender, I should think.”

Harry rolled his eyes. "Right, well, here comes your brother and his girlfriend. You'd best put it away if you don't want Hermione memorising it."

After a quick confirmatory glance toward an incoming crowd of Gryffindors, George placed his "Charms" magazine back in his bag and assembled his own breakfast. "Right, so you had a fun morning, then, Harry?"

Harry shrugged passively while Ginny threw a piece of crust she had been about to eat at her brother. The siblings started a normal round of teasing as Ron, Hermione, and Neville joined them. As he waved to the new arrivals, Harry also saw Umbridge enter the room. Ron was still sitting as far away from Harry as he could manage, which was a drawback this morning since the unusually tall boy was situated in the wrong place to block the foul woman's view of Harry.

As Harry expected, Umbridge halted her progress to the Head Table when she spotted him. She made a beeline as she moved to stand close by the Gryffindor table, a false smile firmly in place on her face. Harry was mildly curious to know what the daily rant would encompass but was secretly hoping that she would get distracted and fly away to bother someone else first.

"Mr Potter," she began in a dubiously pleasant tone upon her arrival, "I believe there must have been some miscommunication yesterday. You see, I teach a class, and you are supposed to be there, yet you were not. I had no note of your excused absence. Why is that?"

Harry adopted an innocent expression as he looked up at her, forcing his eyes wide open and clasping his hands in front of his chest. "Well, Madam Professor, I was summoned to the infirmary by Cyril. He has made the decision that I'm no longer to sit through your ... lectures."

"Now, Mr Potter, that simply won't do." She was keeping her composure fairly well, Harry thought, even if her attire was still hideous. "You're required to take the course, everyone below sixth-year is. It's part of the rules."

Harry raised one eyebrow, choosing a slightly shocked expression, while switching his hands to a defensive gesture. "Really? I never knew that! Is the requirement over when you take your O.W.L. or when your year is over?"

Her face twitched ever so slightly, but she kept her smile in place. "The rules are quite specific. All students below sixth-year, Mr Potter, are to take the core curriculum."

"I see. That's certainly a problem. Sadly, in this case, Arts Madam, I must refer you to my Mentor." Harry tried for a contrite look, but Ginny kicking his shin under the table told him it was falling somewhat short of the mark. "As soon as Cyril tells me to return to your class, I will, but until then, I simply cannot. I cannot legally disobey his orders."

Umbridge stood there glowering at Harry for a moment before turning and walking stiffly to the Head Table. By the time she was some ten feet away, Ginny was laughing quietly while Fred and George were busily scribbling down something.

"You know, Harry," Neville offered quietly from Ginny's other side, "if you keep poking her with a stick, she's liable to bite."

"I should be so lucky," Harry said with a wistful sigh. "Then I could get her fired, after I get a tetanus shot."

"Harry," Hermione cut in, "she may not be a very good teacher, but she does deserve some respect. She had to have been hired by Professor Dumbledore for a reason."

Harry glanced at Hermione's earnest look with open surprise. "Do you mean to tell me you don't know why she's here?"

Hermione's expression took on a bright-eyed gaze that was disturbingly keen. "Of course we do. She made a speech, after all, when she arrived. You weren't here at dinner, though, when she did that."

"Really? What did she tell you?"



Hermione's smile faltered ever so slightly, but her eyes had a twinkle eerily reminiscent of the headmaster. "Well, she didn't come right out and say it, but it basically was a speech about revamping the lessons and being sure that the teachers are up to snuff. I'm not sure it's really needed, but she does have the Minister's ear."

Harry sighed. "Yes, she has the Minister's ear and probably a few other things as well. Dumbledore didn't hire her, Hermione. He didn't even want her here, but Fudge foisted her off on him with some silly rule wrangling. She's a spy, nothing more, and a rather poor one at that."

Hermione looked doubtful, but Harry was surprised Ron was nodding. "Figures," the redhead offered quietly. "She couldn't teach binning, let alone Defence. I can't imagine we'll do well this year."

Fred slapped that table lightly, gathering everyone's attention. "Too right, Ron, too right. We were just talking about that on the way down here. We ought to talk to Dumbledore about it, and see if he can get a decent teacher in here."

Harry was uncertain what precisely was taking place among the siblings, but the sudden statement from Ron and the non-reaction from the others left him feeling uneasy. Before he could try to understand exactly what was going on, however, there was a loud choking noise coming from the Head Table, accompanied by breaking glass.

Umbridge was flailing about in her chair, her tongue lolling out at an impressively swollen two or three feet at least. The "enhanced" collection of jam pots, replete in their dainty metal holder, were on the floor, shattered in pieces. A large bagel was also on the floor, one prominent bite taken out of it.

As Harry watched Umbridge thrash about for a moment, he saw Fred and George adopt surprised expressions out of the corner of his eye. By the time Flitwick arrived from the other end of the table, the woman was also slowly morphing into a credible likeness of Fudge. Overall, Harry had to admit he was impressed. It was a very

elaborate mixture to set off two distinct pranks and not have either potion interfere with the other, which would cause unstable side effects.

“Very nice,” he said quietly, “two potion pranks that were stable when mixed and surely odourless as well. I’m impressed.”

Fred clucked his tongue slightly. “Yes, well, the tongue was supposed to reach the floor. Still needs a bit of work, I’d say.”

George, being the one in front and thus blocking the view of Fred from the Head Table, said nothing but nodded his head slightly.

“You pranked the staff?!” Hermione hissed. “What were you thinking! You could get into all kinds of trouble!”

Ginny was laughing with one fist stuffed in her mouth when Harry turned to regard Hermione. “Oh? Well, I don’t mind. After all, Fred and George weren’t the ones that delivered it. What are the Staff going to do? Give me more detention?” Harry’s smile was accompanied by an exaggerated eye rolling. “Really, Hermione, try to find some time to relax, would you?”

When Harry turned back around, Flitwick was helping Umbridge back to her feet, and she was glaring harshly at everyone in the Hall that was laughing. When her eyes landed on Harry, however, he knew he was in for the entire blame.

“Potter! You did this!”

Harry was amused to note that any pretence of civility was quite dead.

“Nope, sorry. I quite wish I had thought of it. That was really a nice touch there at the end, that whole Fudge imitation. The bow in your hair wasn’t quite the right colour to match his bowler, though.”

Glowing and visibly fuming, the woman stormed down from behind the Head Table, with Flitwick in tow, and Harry braced himself for a disturbingly loud verbal assault of baseless accusations. He was

pleasantly surprised, however, when Umbridge never had the chance to vent her bile, as Professor McGonagall arrived before she could reach his seat.

“Is there some sort of problem here, Filius?” Her tone was cool, but it conveyed all the expectations of immediate compliance that Harry was learning to appreciate.

“Just a little prank or two, it would seem, Minerva,” Flitwick said with a wide smile and a cheery tone. “Pretty nice magic, really.”

“I see. And is Mr Potter somehow involved in this?”

Harry looked McGonagall in the eye and held out one hand as though swearing an oath. “I will honestly state that I never knowingly touched anything that could have been or was used in any prank this morning, Professor McGonagall. Moreover, I had no knowledge of any plans to prank the Dark Madam, nor do I have the knowledge of how the pranks that did take place this morning were devised.”

Harry was certain that the stern woman could understand that there were quite a few things he had left unspecified, but at least the form had been met. “Very well, then. Everyone, please return to your breakfast. This morning’s entertainment is over, isn’t it, Mr Potter? Messrs Weasley?”

Harry opted to say nothing. He simply nodded his head in an overt display of submission. Fred and George, on the other hand, just winked at the professor before they turned back to their breakfasts.

As the conversation slowly resumed, Harry noticed that the Great Hall was nearly full of students eating breakfast. There was still a virtual void between where the group he sat with ended and where anyone else was sitting, but the consistent addition of Hermione, Ron, and Neville was the first step in slightly expanding the boundary. For the moment, Harry was content to let things stabilize, and he was sure his mentors would agree with that.

Harry had finished his breakfast and was listening to the banter between the friends and siblings. The sweeping rush of wings filled the Great Hall as the various postal owls arrived, streaming through the special openings near the ceiling. Knowing that he was overdue for a response of some kind from the Weasley matriarch, Harry made sure to scan the incoming deliveries for anything overtly magical. Given that everyone around him had stopped talking and was more or less doing the same thing was a silent testament to the spirit of the moment. He thought he saw money change hands between the twins and Ron, but he was unwilling to take his eyes off the birds to check.

When all of the owls had apparently arrived and delivered their letters, he looked back to see the group around him fairly despondent. "It's got to be something good, eh?" Fred muttered finally. "It's been two days, that's enough time for almost anything."

Ginny chuckled quietly. "And that's what's so fun about it. It could be anything. By the by, Harry, you really don't know what she's been trying to tell you. Maybe you should just accept one to find out?" Her winsome smile was only slightly marred by the tiredness lingering in her expression.

"Right," Harry laughed, "I'll do just that. Assuming I'm not turned into a newt, everyone here can enjoy your mum screaming at me in a voice fit to raise the dead."

Hermione, however, had a glint in her eye. "Surely you admit to being curious about what she might have to say, Harry?"

Harry see-sawed one hand in the air. "M'eh. Curiosity is all well and good, but I'm not an advocate of being curious about things already known to be unpleasant."

"But you use the Bubble-Head Charm to block the sound. Why not accept one while standing inside a really large Bubble? Then you could know and not be subjected to the, er, ridicule."

Harry laughed at Hermione's logic. "Right, right, but Mrs Weasley could just as easily write it all in a normal letter, now couldn't she? If

she did that, I'd accept it and see what she has to say, but trying to force your thoughts on someone else? No thanks. It's the principle involved, Hermione – well, that and I rather like my hearing."

George seemed to be in complete disagreement based on his frown. "There's no fun in just sending a letter, Harry. Half the fun of magic is doing something weird. What about a singing letter? Or one that spoke in Gregorian Chant? How about one that only spoke in riddles?"

Harry smirked slightly. "That could be fun. You get your mum to send me a non-Howler message, and I'll listen to it. No explosions, no hexes, nothing like that – but the format of delivery, sure, I'm game. But you have to talk her into it."

Ginny was rubbing her hands together in excitement. "I'll do it! I'll write to Mum and send it off at lunch."

"You know you've completely set yourself up, right, Harry?" Neville's quiet voice was laced with humour, though Harry thought he could even detect a hint of expectation in it.

Harry waved the notion off, although he was honest enough with himself to admit to a mixture of curiosity and perhaps a bit of dread over what might arrive next. As the Great Hall slowly emptied with people heading for their first lessons, Harry walked with the group on foot while the twins merrily took off on their brooms to Transfiguration. Harry was content to walk in silence, listening to the others discuss possible lesson plans and the upcoming Quidditch season.

Following the other students into the Charms classroom, however, left Harry milling about with everyone else. Professor Flitwick was standing at the head of the classroom, but all of the desks and chairs were missing, leaving only a wide open space.

As Flitwick waved them all inside, Harry glanced around before he noticed something flashing in his peripheral vision. Glancing up, he nudged Ginny and Neville, motioning them to look as well. Harry was amused to see the desks and chairs all inverted and stuck on the

vaulted ceiling, as though the students were milling around on the ceiling rather than the floor.

“Good, good, everyone’s here,” the professor said while walking back and forth in rapid staccato steps, his mind clearly racing. “Gather round, gather round!”

Flitwick was almost hopping in his excitement. “Today we’re having a practical exercise lesson, and we’re going to borrow a page from our young Mr Potter.”

Most of the people glanced briefly at Harry, but he ignored the reactions from the mix of Ravenclaws and Gryffindors. Ginny’s look in particular conveyed a world of questions about the sanity of their professor.

“Mr Potter, would you be kind enough to come up here, please?”

Somewhat resigned to being put on display, Harry thought he might have a bit of fun with the Ravenclaws. They were, after all, supposed to be the brainy ones in the castle, if Floppy was even faintly acting as the Hat claimed it was. He moved to the front of the classroom and stood next to the professor, who once again impressed Harry with his short stature, given the amount of raw presence the man exuded.

When he caught Hermione’s gaze, he smirked at her scowl, then he adopted his best game face. “How may I be of assistance, sir?”

“Previously you did an excellent demonstration of control and switching from one charm to another.” Flitwick held out a small, soft ball in one hand. “I’d like you to repeat that demonstration for the class, please, as we will all be practicing the combination of Summoning and Banishing Charms for today’s lesson.”

Harry paused to see faintly surprised expressions on everyone’s face. Noticing how the Ravenclaws were clumped together, Harry decided this was an opportune moment to exercise the curiosity the Headmaster had warned him of, no matter how obscure the warning had been when delivered.

“Certainly, sir.” Harry scooped up the ball, tossed it in the air quickly, and then began a rapid series of Banishing and Summoning Charms, entirely silent. Ignoring the frowns from the students, Harry began humming faintly as he moved the ball around the room.

“Mr Potter, if you would say the words, please?”

Harry thought the professor was fully aware of what he was doing and, if the man’s tone was any indicator, approved fully. “Sorry, sir, forgot,” Harry said with a smile, never missing a beat with the charm switching. “Ding.” Banish. “Dong.” Summon. “The.” Banish. “Wicked.” Summon. “Witch.” Banish. “Is.” Summon. “Dead.” Banish.

“Mr Potter, the proper words, if you would be so kind?”

Harry was now convinced the professor was amused. “Ohhh,” Harry said while continuing to bounce the ball. “Right, awfully sorry. Accio! Expellus! Accio! Expellus! Accio! Expell—”

“Excellent, Mr Potter. Please stop now, thank you.”

Harry silently Summoned the ball back to his hand, and dropped it in the outstretched hand of the professor. “Take five points for, ah, your House, Mr Potter.”

Harry sauntered back to his original position between Neville and Ginny. Neville rolled his eyes at Harry while Ginny had her gaze locked on Hermione’s expression, which Harry could only describe as ecstatic.

“Now, what Mr Potter has demonstrated requires quite a bit of control and focus. As such, it’s a perfect exercise for everyone to improve their magic skills. I have a soft ball for everyone – no, not you, Mr Potter, you’re free to please either help others or quietly do your own work on other assignments – and I expect each of you to practice this.”

As Flitwick wandered around passing out the balls, Harry sat over in a corner and dug out the Transfiguration Theory book that McGonagall had loaned him. Breaking the Sticking Charm on one of the chairs, Harry floated it down from the ceiling and settled in for a comfortable couple of hours for reading.

“Please note that the balls are soft so that you will not hurt others or yourself – careful there, Mr Weasley – as you practice.”

It only took Harry a few moments to realise he needed to set a shield to reflect anything thrown at him, such as one of the many balls flying about the room. He smirked, however, at Ginny, whose look had gone from artful innocence into a scowl when the barrier bounced the ball away on the second “accidental” Banishing Charm that would have caused it to impact on Harry’s forehead.

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As they filed into the Transfiguration classroom, Harry decided he was going to force Ginny’s progress along the magic skills front. “Right, you’re sitting with me, Ginny.” Harry shot a glance at Neville. “Sorry, Neville, but I promised to help Ginny fix a couple of problems she’s been having lately.”

Neville just smiled as he headed for a seat with the Ravenclaw student Hermione had been previously sitting with. “I heard about that,” he offered quietly. “I’m glad she’s the one getting the help, not me.” As Neville passed Harry, he leaned slightly closer and whispered a parting comment. “And I’m glad you have to deal with her anger, not me.”

Harry smirked at the thought of all the students afraid of little Ginny Weasley. Dropping into the seat behind the two-person table, Harry shot a bemused look at her, ignoring her obvious confusion over what he was smiling about. “Why is it so many people are afraid of the Big Bad Ginny?”

Ginny frowned sharply at Harry before glaring at the back of Neville’s head. “You’ll find out, Harry, if you keep it up.”



Before he could fire a retort, however, McGonagall called the class to order and handed out boxes of mice and trays of snails to each table. Their only direction was to continue practicing the Vanishing spells on the creatures, and if they were successful, to help their partners master the technique more quickly. The year was long, and O.W.L.s were coming no matter how far away they seemed. Harry tuned out the several minutes of extraneous warnings and dire predictions of problems from the professor, and he focused instead on observing how she moved.

McGonagall was quite tall for a woman. Her attire merely enhanced both her height and her thin build, but when she walked, there was a hint of power and grace that was hard to characterise from her physical stature. The woman moved with the grace of a long-time ballet performer but the authority and self-assurance of a tiger on the hunt. Her movements were deceptive in that she never appeared to be hurrying, yet she always travelled at a noticeably quick pace. In all, he was quite curious what she had done before becoming a professor.

Ginny's sharp nudge in his ribs jarred him out of his analysis, and she smirked briefly as he realised that the lecture was over and students were now practicing magic. "Isn't she a little old for you to be looking at like that?" Ginny's whisper carried overtones of delight, probably for catching Harry in a perceived daydream.

Harry shot her an amused look before he returned in kind. "Now now, Ginny, there's no need to be jealous of every woman I happen to notice." When her eyes flashed, he nodded his head slightly to warn her that McGonagall was approaching. Her eyes darted to the side and back, narrowing as they focused on Harry again in silence.

"So are you going to show me you can Vanish the mouse?" Harry asked at a normal volume.

McGonagall drifted to a stop at their desk. "Oh? Miss Weasley, can you? I had not realised you succeeded in the last class."

Ginny was looking at Harry with something bordering on active antipathy, which he ignored. "C'mon, Ginny, you said it was just a matter of willpower and concentration. Let's see it."

Glaring at Harry for another moment, she drew the pattern in the air with precise motions as she clearly succeeded in Vanishing the mouse with a well enunciated “Evanescio!” Blinking at the disappearance, Ginny shot Harry a look of complete victory.

McGonagall ignored the byplay entirely, although Harry was certain she had understood the various facial expressions exchanged. “Excellent, Miss Weasley. Five points to Gryffindor for your performance under pressure. Now, Mr Potter, would you be so good as to Vanish this hedgehog?” With a disturbingly casual motion, the professor deposited said animal in the box Ginny had just emptied.

Harry was tempted to raise some objections, but the smirk he would swear was on the professor’s lips, not to mention Ginny’s look of glee, gave him no choice. He had learned only very rudimentary cleaning charms years ago but had never worked on the Vanishing family of magic with living creatures. Unlike his classmates, he had spent almost zero time practicing any of his lessons-based exercises outside of class.

Taking a deep breath, Harry concentrated on the state he needed to work the basic cleaning charms, reflecting on the minor differences between those and the fully generic Vanishing spell. Making the same precise motions Ginny had earlier, albeit in smaller gestures, Harry silently released the spell and was rewarded with Vanishing the hedgehog and the box it was sitting in. Seeing his success, Harry immediately winked at McGonagall while doing his best to keep the smirk off his face and ignore Ginny’s sudden scowl.

“I am impressed, Mr Potter, but you should not have Vanished the box as well. That will be five points for, ah, House Potter then. Do practice more on your control.” With a few taps of her wand, the box, hedgehog, and mouse were all back on the desk. She scooped up the hedgehog and moved away. Harry wanted to laugh outright when he saw her stop in front of Hermione and Ron, depositing the hedgehog on their desk.

When he looked back at Ginny, she was still scowling slightly. In response, Harry winked at her, too, before he flicked his wand and

quietly spoke aloud for her benefit, “Silencio!” Ginny’s scowl became blatant outrage when she realised no sound was coming from her working mouth.

“Since you can Vanish your mouse, Ginny, do it silently. After all, you already know that saying the words isn’t necessary. You’re just too used to hearing your voice, so you need to get used to doing things nonverbally.” Harry paused while she continued to glare at him. “Just think if you could have cast a silent Finite earlier this morning, then you could have cushioned the blow, eh? Learning this skill will speed up your other lessons.”

After another moment of staring, she finally turned back to the box holding a mouse and the small tray holding three snails. With one last glance at Harry, she began repeated efforts to Vanish the creatures, starting with the snails. Watching her only for the first two tries, which yielded no results whatsoever, Harry pulled out the book on Transfiguration Theory that McGonagall had lent him during the first lesson and resumed reading it.

A sudden crack! near Harry’s elbow during the practice session caused him to turn immediately while rising, as he trained both wands on the space beside him, ready to fling curses and worse at the sound of someone Apparating. When he saw a small house-elf standing there, he put away his wands and sat back down, slowly becoming aware of the nearly complete silence in the classroom.

The little house-elf was staring at Harry with wide eyes, twisting his poor hands in a dry washing motion. “Master Potter, sir?” The voice was squeaky, uncertain, and the elf kept looking about at all the students with obvious discomfort.

“Yes?” Harry asked gently, understanding that the elf was all but terrified.

“Madam Pomfrey’s respects, Master Potter, sir, but she sent me with a message, sir.” So saying, the elf pulled a folded note out of his tea cosy and tried handing it to Harry, although Harry did not reach to take it immediately. As soon as Harry’s concentrated vision revealed

it was ordinary parchment, lacking any aura, he took the note from the elf. Almost instantly the elf disappeared again with a soft crack!

Harry could hear the footsteps of Professor McGonagall approaching in the suddenly silent classroom. Ignoring the tread of the woman's feet, Harry quickly flipped open the note and scanned the contents.

Mr Potter –

Professor Dumbledore has awoken. Both Cyril and he are requesting your immediate presence. Please join us promptly in the private room.  
P. Pomfrey

Harry let out a slow breath he had not realised he was holding, folding the note back in half. When McGonagall came to a stop in front of his desk, he silently handed it to her. Glancing at Ginny, he caught an impression of open curiosity on her face, although he was uncertain if that was because she had or had not read the note over his shoulder. With a flick of his wand, he released the Silencing Charm on her throat and gathered his materials, stuffing them back into the bag.

When he was ready, he looked up at McGonagall and received a fractional nod of assent. With a cursory wave to the others, Harry left the classroom and hurried toward the hospital wing, once again irritated that he had left his broom back in the suite of rooms he shared with his mentor.

The infirmary was empty, although he could hear noises coming from the back of the room where Dumbledore had been moved. He was emphatically not looking forward to the next conversation, as not only would it be yet one more rehashing of recent events, but he would also need to spend some time explaining his own actions. On the other hand, Dumbledore had more than a few actions of his own to explain. Taking a deep breath, Harry quietly opened the door leading into the private area.

Harry stood there in the doorway, watching the magic rolling around the headmaster's body for a moment. It was a pool of power, rippling and sliding, first one vibrant colour then another. It was nothing short of breathtaking to behold, the beauty of the man's aura giving no hint

of the deadly skill with which it could be wielded. Harry had no idea how long he stood there before Cyril looked over and spotted him.

“Ah, Harry, do come in,” Cyril called from where he stood by the Headmaster’s side. Dumbledore was propped up in the bed, a mound of pillows behind his back. Madam Pomfrey was hovering by his side, doing something with a collection of potions and some instruments Harry would surely never be able to identify.

The twinkle in Dumbledore’s eyes was missing, Harry realised, and he thought the man looked nothing so much as very old and very tired. Where his hair had been a mix of grey and silver, it was now pure silver. His mouth was set in a grim line, as though he was in pain, and his right hand was firmly gripping the railing on the edge of the bed. The heavily bandaged stump of his left arm was lying across the man’s chest.

“Headmaster,” Harry said, while staying precisely where he was, “I’m sorry for this.” Ignoring the look of surprise on everyone’s faces, Harry’s silent Stupefy! left Dumbledore slumped unconscious in the bed.

A/N:

FF-net's story import feature is a real PITA. Sometimes it works very smoothly, and sometimes (like on this chapter), I have to babysit every single line it imports. Eventually I just give up and hope the formatting is reasonably tolerable and that no lines have been dropped, especially on a larger chapter.

A big thank you to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. So, immeasurable thanks to cwarbeck and Chreechree. Thanks to Reg, Lathac and random others for their aid with Brit-picking, to Sovran for a sanity check plus tweaks, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

For those that like to send me little notes asking me to hurry up and update, please don't. I'm glad you're so interested in the story, but

Real Life exists in the adult world. Until the next update, patience is recommended. As stated previously, this story will not be abandoned. (Well, as long as I don't get hit by a bus or something.)

## Chapter 24: Interest

Tue, 12 Sep 1995, 10:29

In a flash of fire, Fawkes appeared on the headboard of the bed where Dumbledore lay unconscious, his glorious wings spread to full extension and his feathers extended in a warning crest. Harry had a sudden, vivid recollection of the phoenix attacking Crowley and hoped he would be given time to explain before he found himself on the wrong side of the bird's ire.

Hoping for the best, he ignored the inarticulate cry of protest from Madam Pomfrey as Cyril took one step back and brought his own wand out, the point directed into the space halfway between Harry and Dumbledore.

"Madam Pomfrey! Be still!" Harry ordered, and, to his mild surprise, she stopped reaching toward the headmaster and stood glowering in evident righteous anger, arms outstretched and hands flexing in her professional conflict. "Both of you, back away from the bed!"

Cyril immediately took several more steps backward, redirecting his wand to point at the headmaster, while Madam Pomfrey stood her ground. "Mr Potter, he is sick and wounded, and you are making things worse!" Fawkes gave another harsh cry as he kept his gaze locked on the people in the room, a soft light radiating from his raised crest.

"If you move any closer to him, I'll Stun you too, Madam!" Harry could tell she was less than pleased, but at the moment he had enough problems to be going on with. "Back away and give me some time to examine everything."

"Absolutely not!" Madam Pomfrey's voice could have polished diamonds. "You'll explain yourself before I let you do anything more in this room!" Fawkes let out a trill that seemed to be in complete agreement with the mediwitch, and it left Harry feeling a discomfort akin to the sensation of a snake slowly crawling up the inside of his trouser leg.

Harry could tell Pomfrey was going to be adamant in demanding an explanation, but he was still operating under rules of secrecy. Content that the mediwitch would at least not be physically approaching the headmaster for the moment, Harry flicked his eyes to Cyril and asked the silent question. What can she learn?

Cyril's wand was now firmly aimed at the headmaster, an unwavering presence of alertness about the man that clashed horribly with his hospital-issue pyjamas. "I have talked with Poppy a bit, Harry. I believe you may tell her anything that does not violate your primary objectives. Her risk factor is negligible, and she never leaves the castle." Fawkes was shifting from one foot to the other, and it was obvious that the phoenix was agitated and alarmed.

Keeping his eyes on the phoenix, Harry nodded his acceptance of the information from Cyril before he moved away from the doors. With a casual and silent Colloportus, the doors sealed into an unbreakable whole with the wall. Several Imperturbable Charms later, he felt that the room was secure enough to talk cautiously. Turning his wand back on the unconscious Dumbledore, which earned him a baleful look from Fawkes, Harry let out a long breath to prepare for the impending conversation.

"Madam Pomfrey," Harry said as he gestured toward a chair as calmly as he could manage, "please, sit over here. I won't do anything, but I do need to talk to both of you." Harry paused to regard the phoenix carefully. "Fawkes, I promise, as long as Dumbledore doesn't move, I won't do anything to him." Fawkes gave a loud trill, somewhere between irritation and comfort, before the phoenix relaxed visibly and settled on the headboard. The crest retracted, but the wings stayed half extended, as though the phoenix could wrap Dumbledore in a mother's embrace at any second.

With an obvious air of disappointment and frustration, Madam Pomfrey sat primly and looked expectantly at Harry. For his part, he moved into the space she had recently occupied and kept his wand on the prone form in the bed. He tried to ignore the phoenix that was a silent spectator and judge rolled into one and, very possibly, an executioner as well. Dumbledore's aura was still rolling, shifting, and shimmering like a fresh spring welling up out of the ground. The



surface visage was heavily distorted, and the bands of colours were breathtaking yet appalling. It seemed distinctly possible that there were two executioners in the room.

"Madam Pomfrey, are you aware that I can see auras?"

Silence was the only answer. Taking a few steps backward to be well out of reach of the headmaster should he wake suddenly and lunge from the bed, Harry looked at the mediwitch. Her expression was one of obvious surprise. Resigned to giving an even longer explanation than he wanted, Harry moved all the way back to the wall, resting his back on it as he regarded both Cyril and the matron. Cyril had Dumbledore under guard, so Harry could relax slightly and freely try to find words to explain enough that they might appreciate the precarious situation.

"Right. That's a secret, so no talking about it, not without dire need. Do either of you know what an aura should look like?"

Madam Pomfrey shot a glance at Cyril, who was frowning slightly, but it was the mediwitch who responded. "I've read descriptions in the Healer texts from other people that could see them to varying degrees. They were all old passages." Harry kept watching her as she paused and closed her eyes, apparently concentrating on what she had read long ago. "I think they said something about reflecting the type of magic the person was using."

Harry nodded but said nothing. He looked at Cyril, one eyebrow flexed in silent query, but his Mentor only shook his head, the man's eyes never deviating from Dumbledore's form. Harry knew Cyril had to know more than that, as he had found a way to defeat Harry's aura vision, but for whatever reason the man was keeping silent for now. Fawkes seemed to be calming down since they were only talking, but the phoenix was still on protective display.

"Okay, then I need to give you the whole picture. Bear in mind, what you learned is based on an old understanding of magic. What I'm telling you is based on the best information we have today, but we might be slightly off in places. First, it's not seeing an aura, really. Instead, it's seeing magic as a type of light, not just energy. Everyone

can see most spells, as the energy is focused in a burst, but really, everything with magic in it . . . leaks, I suppose. The more magic that is inside something, the more that it leaks, and the brighter it appears with a so-called aura. Does that make sense?"

Madam Pomfrey nodded slowly, as though the information was new but not quite surprising.

"Good. I want to use your word - reflection - but it's not completely correct, that idea of seeing the reflection of the magic being used. Reflection is the important concept here. Your aura doesn't tell me anything about you personally, unless you're very devoted to a few possible things. That, uh, colours your aura into one of a few certain . . . possibilities. However, most people are a bit of a mix, and their auras reflect that. The universal truth, though, is that the 'reflection' is kind of like a mirror. It doesn't change much, but it gets brighter or dimmer based on how you feel. If you're content and relaxed, your aura is kind of dim. If you're worked up over something, well, it's pretty bright - unless you've had some training to control your emotions."

Cyril cleared his throat meaningfully, so Harry stopped and waited for his Mentor to speak.

"I thought the aura changes as you use magic," Cyril stated, his eyes still firmly on the supine form of the headmaster. "That it's constantly changing."

Harry shrugged absently. "Not really. The hand you're doing magic with will change the aura around it with a particular spell. You'll get some brief whorls in other places during the spell, but your overall aura is actually pretty stable. The colours and patterns change over time, but it's a long-term thing, as in months and years. There is a part of the aura that's, well, we think it's unique for each person and never changes, but that's only part of the overall aura. The brightness can change rapidly, though, kind of like a flickering light, if you're worked up enough emotionally."

"All right," Cyril said after a moment. "So what exactly is the problem with Albus?"

Harry sighed for a moment. "His aura image, the sort-of reflection, it should be like a still pond. When he casts magic, it should ripple slightly like a fish just under the surface. When I look at him, though, it's like a big rock keeps getting thrown in to the middle of a small pond over and over again."

Once again, silence was the only response. It was Madam Pomfrey that finally broke down first. "What does that mean? And have you ever seen it before?"

Harry shrugged. "I've no clue what it means, but I don't like it. And I have seen something similar before, once that I remember clearly. There may have been one or two other times, but I'm not sure." Harry paused to find the right words to make sure Cyril would understand exactly what he was saying. "The confirmed occasion was four days ago, when we had that sticky problem with the fireplace. Things there were . . . grim and gaunt, you might say."

Harry could see Cyril's eyebrows rise steeply at that, and he was hopeful that all of the descriptions he had provided for the strange behaviour of the raw magic all over the floor of the Gaunt House were coming back firmly to his Mentor. In other times, he might even be amused to see Cyril slowly back away even further from the bed, coming to rest on a wall himself. In this case, however, it was simply depressing to consider that they both had reached the same conclusion. Fawkes responded to the retreat with a soft crooning song, folding the beautiful wings in and rubbing his head against Dumbledore's for a moment.

"So what does that mean?" Madam Pomfrey was clearly starting to realise some possible implications since her eyes followed Cyril's cautious retreat, and she was looking rather uncomfortable sitting so close to the bed herself. While she lacked the knowledge of what transpired previously, she was quite intelligent, and the connections were not hard to make, particularly when Cyril was so clearly alarmed.

"If I had to take a guess," Harry said quietly, "I think we should assume the headmaster has been compromised and is, at the least, not in total control of his magic. That should mean he's not in full

control of his mind, either, but Crowley said he would be free of the curse. I trust Crowley completely."

"Poppy," Cyril spoke rather sharply, "weren't you telling me this morning that Albus' magic was missing? It wasn't registering on your tests?"

"Yes," the mediwitch offered quite slowly. "It's as though his core is completely drained or is just not there. It's been like that since Mr Potter brought him in."

"Hmmm." Harry shifted around, trying to piece it together. "I can assure you, he's glowing like someone has really annoyed him. His aura is unusually large, especially considering how well the Headmaster keeps his emotions in check. It's even reaching the floor, and I've only ever seen that a few times in someone not actually touching the ground."

The three of them sat in silence for some time before Cyril cleared his throat again. "I don't see that we're going to resolve anything, Harry. I have been conversing with Albus since shortly after he woke, and he seems quite in control of his faculties. His wand is not in this room, yet despite many opportunities, he has done nothing untoward."

"Perhaps," Harry said softly. "But I'm under mutual oath with Dumbledore to tell him certain things. Need I point out just how bad things could be if he's compromised? I'm already pushing the edges of the oath as it is."

"Indeed." Cyril's voice held neither approval nor condemnation but was somehow a bit of both. "That would be a consequence of a hastily made decision."

Harry felt somewhat surly over the implication of his Mentor's tone, but understood the underlying message even if he failed to agree with it. "It wasn't hasty," he muttered. "Imprecisely worded, yeah, all right."

"It's your self-deception." Cyril's tone was still calm and unemotional, and Harry knew he was not winning anything on this line of

discussion. "Decisions made in anger are always decisions made in haste."

Finally, Harry sighed and faced the inevitable. "So you think I should just wake him up and tell him everything?"

"What other options are there?"

"None, I suppose." Harry paused to reflect on the situation and how uneasy it made him feel. "However, I don't see the point in us all being in here. If things do go as well as they did last time, only one of us ought to be trapped inside with him."

Cyril nodded, his eyes still on the headmaster as they had been for some time. "A reasonable precaution. I shall step out, Harry, and you may . . . discuss . . . your actions with Albus."

Internally, Harry knew he was not going to enjoy this conversation. It was, nevertheless, a conversation that had to take place, even if he was now wishing he had never made an Unbreakable Vow with the man. Perfectly well-thought-out plans failed to survive first encounters with reality, let alone repeated encounters, and this was simply another pointed reminder, as if the past two weeks had failed to drill that concept home thoroughly. Explaining the situation in the castle was going to be difficult at best, let alone what had happened during the fight at the Gaunt house.

Resigned to the outcome, Harry stood and released the door-sealing charms and enough of the Imperturbable spells to allow his Mentor to leave, though Cyril was only standing by the door waiting. Madam Pomfrey, however, ignored the outstretched hand from his mentor and showed no intention of leaving anytime soon. "Madam Pomfrey?"

With a grimace, the middle-aged woman rose to her feet, glowering again at Harry. "I will revive Professor Dumbledore, Mr Potter, and after I have ascertained his condition, I will leave you to your discussion. But you will not bar me from this room. Cyril will guard your privacy from everyone else."

Harry shrugged in silent acquiescence, watching with grim spirits as Cyril left the room and Madam Pomfrey began casting diagnostics on Dumbledore, always under the watchful eyes of Fawkes. After a few moments, she appeared to reach her conclusion and swiftly cast a Rennervate.

Harry saw the headmaster stir almost immediately, arching his back slightly and reaching with both arms for the sides of the bed. When his truncated left arm banged lightly into the railing on the bed, the man's eyes shot wide open, and he moaned slightly.

"Albus?" Madam Pomfrey's voice was extremely soft and the most hesitant Harry had ever heard it. Fawkes again crooned faintly, shifting slightly to keep one eye on Harry and one eye on Dumbledore's open gaze.

For Harry, the ensuing quiet was incredibly tense. His wand tip was locked on the bed, and he was prepared to hex with full power at the drop of a pin. When the headmaster finally responded, however, the voice was so drawn and tired Harry could feel his tension easing in empathic sorrow, despite his concerns and fears.

"Yes, Poppy?"

"How do you feel?"

Dumbledore's eyes flicked over to Harry, and it was as though Harry could feel the weight of the world slowly settle onto his own shoulders. Dumbledore's look was full of something beyond description; something sad and full of a terrible void was regarding Harry with an exterior calm that was almost horrifying. For the briefest moment, Harry thought he was drowning under the sensation, and then it was over. The headmaster was just tired, his gaze sad and forlorn, and his voice barely above a whisper. "I feel well enough, Poppy."

The mediwitch gave Harry a frosty glance before she turned back to Dumbledore. "Mr Potter here has some things to discuss with you. Supposedly, he's not just being contumacious all the time, but you'll be the one to judge that, I trust." She paused to cast another set of diagnostics on the headmaster, shaking her head slightly as she

finished. "I'll be right outside the room with Master Feiner, Headmaster, so please call if you feel too tired or are in pain."

Madam Pomfrey spent a minute bustling about, straightening the bed and Dumbledore's bedclothes as well as the various vials and materials on the table by the bed. Apparently satisfied at last, she shot a final warning look at Harry on her way out that promised quite a bit of unpleasantness should he fail to be exceedingly courteous and considerate. Harry wondered fleetingly if the mediwitch and McGonagall stayed up late at night honing their looks of intimidation.

All sources of distraction removed, Harry found his eyes once again locked on the man who was the indirect root of so many problems Harry had to deal with, and he shifted about as he tried to find some way to start the conversation. Root cause or not, justified resentment or not, Harry was saddened to see a person so full of vigour reduced to this empty husk before him.

Dumbledore beat him to the point, however, as Harry continued wool-gathering. The headmaster's eyes were still full of disturbing emptiness. "And so we are as we began, Harry. Perhaps you would like to start with your propensity to make an entrance?"

Rather than the overtones of power and refined culture that usually comprised the man's speech, Harry felt that his voice was almost as barren as his eyes. The rich timbre was now a half-whisper, and whereas before he had made statements that felt like commands, he was now asking questions that felt like pleas.

"Err . . . what do you know already?" Harry asked, his own voice hesitant and weak, almost an echo of the current expressive manner from the man rumoured to be the most powerful wizard in the world.

"Very little. Cyril was being courteous but extremely uninformative, and Poppy tells me I have apparently lost my magic." Dumbledore's gaze was still piercing, even if it was disturbingly strange. "Cyril hinted at a few bits but, with Poppy in the room, was only able to say that you and I must talk. Finally, you yourself have said nothing, yet the way you're holding your wand says everything."

Harry involuntarily shrugged, his body reacting to the words before he could suppress the reaction. "Yes, well, it's . . . complicated. I'm not quite sure where to start. Your magic is still, uh, there, but there's some confusion as to why it's not, mmm, responding. Unfortunately, I'm also not sure what might be safe to tell you." Harry slid the tip of his wand back and forth in the air, carefully aiming from head to toe of the headmaster, but never moving away from the body entirely. Fawkes was no longer acting nervous or aggressive, but the bird kept one eye on Harry at all times. "There is some question as to whether your . . . faculties are completely under your control."

Dumbledore said nothing for a while, merely watching Harry. With some effort, the man pulled himself into a partially upright position, his one good arm laboriously dragging the extra pillows behind him so he could be comfortable. Harry offered no assistance, and it was obvious that the headmaster expected none. Once he was settled in place, Fawkes shifted around to the side of the bed before hopping onto the edge of the top-most pillow and resting next to the headmaster's shoulder.

"Now, Harry," he said gently, "you perhaps begin to understand my own reluctance when we first met. The issue of what to tell and what to keep in this game is quite deadly." Dumbledore paused to regard Harry for a moment before continuing. "I know where we left off, or rather, where I left off. I had just opened the concealed brick and lost my fight against a most powerful compulsion. And then . . . then, I was here. Perhaps you might like to fill in the blank?"

Even with lingering concern over the situation, Harry reluctantly conceded Cyril's point that there was no changing the outcome now. This may even have been how Dumbledore felt when Harry first trapped him into giving the oath - resignation overpowering all other emotions. Given that all of their activities that fateful day had been Voldemort-centric, his oath mandated that he tell all, regardless of whether that was prudent or not. Lacking the sensory monitor record of the fight or a Pensieve on his person, Harry was left describing everything as well as he could. He tried to explain the aura flaring and the strange effects that all of the magic about Dumbledore had demonstrated during their fight just a few days prior. At no point did Dumbledore change his demeanour, even though he would ask



questions or offer counter-descriptions based on old texts he had read in years past. In all, Harry found the entire conversation extremely uncomfortable.

"I was not aware it was possible to bypass Wards of Exclusion, let alone the ones that are on Hogwarts." Dumbledore was looking at Harry expectantly, but Harry only shook his head.

"Sorry, Headmaster, but that's something you don't need to know right now." Harry winced slightly at stating such a bald truth, but there was little room for error in the situation. Regardless of how much the man might seem to be in control, that information was something he was unwilling to risk even under ideal conditions. "Perhaps when your magic is back under control, we can discuss it."

"Who taught you how to do that, Harry?"

A brief flicker of a smirk crossed Harry's face before the depressing situation reasserted itself. "Let's just say the lesser Exclusion was used to enforce rules I didn't agree with, so I found a way around it."

Dumbledore, for his part, only nodded fractionally as though the answer were almost expected. "I see. And this friend of yours, Mr Crowley, he knew how to break the 'owth Qayin?"

"He can cast it or break it, actually." Harry paused as Dumbledore's eyes widened. "He's been around a very, very long time, and unlike Edgar, he has no interest in civilized entertainments but only a deep love of knowledge."

"Love of knowledge, Harry, does not mandate knowing how to do such Dark things." Dumbledore's voice was still the desolate fraction of what it should have been, and the protracted conversation was leaving Harry increasingly unhappy with holding his wand on the man. The headmaster was obviously no immediate threat, yet he had to admit to himself that he did have some slight fear that it was still a ruse. The man's skills were not to be trifled with, old age or not, and Harry was uncertain just how to best handle the situation.

Sighing, Harry settled for keeping his wand aimed in the general direction of the headmaster, even if it was targeted at the wall above the bed rather than the man in the bed. "That's an empty argument, Headmaster, and you know it. Acts in the name of good can be evil, as the opposite can be true." Dumbledore showed no reaction to this statement, but Harry knew they were both well aware of its truth. "You're also presupposing that the generalised human tendency to be addicted to things of the Dark classification applies to non-humans. I've reason to believe that's just not the case."

"Really?" A hint of interest began showing on Dumbledore's face, building on the earlier interest in the Exclusion bypass. While still a far cry from his normal bustling self, Harry thought the headmaster might be starting to show signs of life again, no matter how muted they may be. "That's not in Remus' Theory of Magic, as I recall."

Harry gave a half-smile in response, finally deciding to take the chance and put his wand away. "No, it's not something you've seen yet. You've got an old copy of the text, sir, from back when it was just one volume. Now it's four volumes, and he's still expanding on it."

"I see. I shall have to ask him for a newer edition." With a soft sigh, the headmaster seemed to deflate back to his state of Spartan awareness. "Neither of us really wish to discuss the true issue, do we?"

The quiet question was far more effective at bringing Harry to a complete halt mentally than anything they had covered previously during the morning. With his own answering sigh, Harry sank down into the chair Madam Pomfrey had used earlier. "No, not really. I am sorry about what I did to you, sir."

Dumbledore said nothing for a moment, merely once again regarding Harry with an air of acceptance even if it was laced with what Harry surmised amounted to the first stages of depression. "It is apparent, Harry, that you had no sustainable choices at that moment. In hindsight, would you have done things differently?"

Harry nodded slowly, swallowing against the discomfort that was slowly rising in the back of his throat. "Yes, I believe I would have."

Unable to hold the headmaster's gaze any longer, Harry studied his boots for a moment before continuing. "I'm sorry to say, though, that you probably would have come out in far worse condition had I done so."

"And what have you learned, Harry?"

"Now that's a loaded question," Harry muttered quietly. Dumbledore showed no tangible reaction, but for some reason Harry thought the man was almost uninterested in his response. "You recall that 'evaluation' duel we had when I arrived?"

It took a moment for Dumbledore to look back at Harry and respond. "Yes. It was quite . . . different from most duels I've been in."

"Yeah, well, I don't like to stick around and trade volleys. Sirius gave me a hard time for not taking things seriously enough during our battle at the Gaunt house, if you'll pardon the puns, and there was a bit of conflict recently that proved his point."

"Recently? You're saying that in the three days I've been in this room, something else has happened?"

"Ah." Harry paused for a moment, wondering how to proceed. "That would be one way of describing it. Err, well, Lucius Malfoy brought Polyjuiced impersonators of his son and Filch with him to the castle, and things got rather sticky. They're all with the Aurors now."

Harry tried to ignore the look of disbelief on the headmaster's face. "And Snape has been kicked out by the Wizengamot, stripped of his teaching credentials."

When Dumbledore's eyebrows rose further, Harry glanced out the window. "Umbridge is trying to take over the school at Fudge's direction, and they've been monkeying with some legal footwork to make it possible. Edgar managed to slip a kink into their plans, but that barrier won't last long when Fudge returns from holiday."

Silence fell over them as Dumbledore seemed to contemplate the synopsis of recent events, although Harry knew he would be subjected to a detailed cross examination.

Dumbledore sighed and pulled off his glasses, setting them atop the blankets. Rubbing at his eyes as though he had stayed up too late reading, the man stilled and re-seated his glasses across his nose. "I see that you have finally had your way, if the Wizengamot has indeed revoked Severus' credentials. Is he going to be arrested?"

"As long as he's law-abiding from here on out, no, I don't think so."

"Very well. I will want to discuss this topic again, Harry, but I must understand more of the events with the Malfoys and Madam Umbridge now. Which would you care to explain first?"

With a sigh, Harry began relaying the sequence of events and acts that surrounded the most recent Malfoy conflict. After covering the suspicions and events leading up to the battle, he skipped the actual battle and only explained the injuries and Aurors involved in the investigation. Harry then recounted Edgar's analysis of the elder Malfoy's options and possible political or legal manoeuvring, as well as the likely outcomes for each option exercised. Without waiting for Dumbledore to ask for clarifications, Harry then proceeded directly into a rehash of the recent Educational Decree project and the rather unsubtle efforts by Fudge's administration to interfere at Hogwarts. When he summarised his verbal exchanges with Umbridge, as well as the unmodified original law and Edgar's enhancements to it, Dumbledore just closed his eyes and reclined on the bed in silence.

"And now the circle is starting to close, Harry." The headmaster's voice was barely above a whisper as he lay motionless. "I expected something like this was coming, but not so soon, and not so forcefully. What do you make of these developments?"

"Honestly, sir, we've been trying to understand Fudge's alternating between the rare astute political move and the more typical act of utter incompetence for a long time now. We just don't see how he does this, since he supposedly was very savvy before he was elected, unless he's bipolar or something."

"Bipolar?" Dumbledore's tone was faintly amused, Harry thought. "Perhaps he is. It's worth thinking on, Harry."

As the silence dragged out, Harry reflected on some of the short discussions he had shared with McGonagall on the situation with Umbridge. He was sure that the deputy headmistress was fully informed of Dumbledore's thoughts and plans and would have her own conversation with the headmaster as soon as she was able to get away from her duties.

Dumbledore's voice broke Harry's moment of reflection, although it was still quite soft and the man remained lying back with his eyes closed. "And how are you getting along with our Professor Umbridge, Harry?"

"All things considered, sir, I'm quite happy to not be in her class anymore." Harry was unable to mask his smug tone, but he was fairly certain the headmaster would understand.

Dumbledore sat back up slowly at Harry's comment, however. "Oh? You are obligated to take her class, Harry. How did you get around that requirement?"

"Cyril told me to stop," Harry offered simply. "He said the temptation was too great."

"Which temptation?"

Harry shrugged. "I didn't ask, but there are just so many with that woman. It could be almost anything."

Dumbledore was silent for a long time, his hollow gaze resting on Harry yet leaving the impression that the headmaster's thoughts were somewhere else entirely. It was an opportune time to sit and reflect on everything they had discussed so far, and ultimately Harry came to the conclusion that if Dumbledore really was a leak of facts and unintentionally aiding the other side, a vast amount of hard work was going to be lost.

"Harry," the headmaster began slowly, "that may be a problem. I was prepared to petition the Board of Governors for a waiver for you to skip core classes you needn't take after testing, and they would have agreed just to have you here. But we decided not to, that you would sit through the Defence classes, and now I'm not sure they would agree. I fear you may have to take all the core classes you signed up for."

"Technically, sir," Harry offered with a smirk, "Cyril told me to stop, so I have to stop. Unless you, as Supreme Mugwump, want to over-ride his instructions until the next Convocation can arbitrate. That's the way it is legally."

"The problem with hiding behind a technicality, Harry, is that they tend to disappear when you need them most." Dumbledore made a vague motion toward the door. "Would you ask Cyril to join us, please?"

Harry moved over toward the doors, careful to keep Dumbledore at least in his peripheral vision, and turned fully sideways as he stood in the doorway. The headmaster was still quiescent in the bed, but, much like Fawkes, Harry wanted to keep an eye on him anyway. Harry was unsurprised to find Cyril sitting comfortably in a chair a few yards off, the man's gaze locked on the doors Harry was propping open with his back. It was slightly unnerving to see Cyril's wand tip aglow with magical power and to subsequently be reminded that his Mentor was prepared for an escape attempt on par with the fiasco over the weekend.

"Any problems?" Harry asked quietly as he beckoned Cyril to come over.

"None of merit," Cyril offered as he stood. "Poppy had to chase Mrs Norris off again, but the cat refuses to accept that Master Filch is not here anymore." When Cyril reached the doors, his mentor inclined his head toward the room Harry was blocking access to, dropping his voice to avoid being overheard. "And are you convinced of anything, Harry?"

Harry, for his part, sighed slightly, still ensuring that the headmaster was in his field of vision. "Not really. I'm rather terrified of some things getting out if Dumbledore isn't in his own mind, but the damage has already been done. I'm keeping a physical distance, but I don't think I need to keep him at wand-point anymore."

Before Cyril could say anything else, Madam Pomfrey strode out of her office and paused to regard the pair by the door to the private room.

"Well?"

Harry paused to let Cyril enter the room past him. With his Mentor now guarding his back, Harry was able to fully look at the woman demanding his attention. Harry could tell she was still anxious about the situation, but she seemed to have reverted to a stronger concern for Dumbledore's health since Harry was obviously not suffering the ill-effects of yet another violent injury. Given her years of experience, Harry surmised that she was likely yielding the evaluation of the headmaster as a possible risk to Cyril and, perhaps to a lesser extent, himself.

"He's all right for now. We're still talking." Observing the mediwitch carefully, he was somewhat hesitant to antagonise the woman any more than he already had for the day. At the same time, he did still need to continue discussing issues with both the headmaster and Cyril. "Do you need to check on Dumbledore, or can I seal the room for a bit since Cyril's in here with us? We do need some privacy."

"You've not abused my patient further?"

Harry winced slightly, knowing that even a remotely incorrect answer was going to make his life hell, but he had to give the woman credit for calling a spade a spade. "Ah, no. We've just been talking."

For an interminable period, Madam Pomfrey regarded Harry silently, a faint look of disapproval on her features. "Very well, Mr Potter, seal the room. But I'm giving you one hour from now, which will bring us to lunchtime, and then I expect to be admitted even if you aren't finished. Is that quite clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said quietly. "Perfectly so." He kept his eyes on her as the woman nodded her acceptance, and she disappeared back into her office. After he pulled himself back into the room, he again sealed the doors and recast Imperturbable Charms about the room.

Dumbledore started the conversation again as Harry finished securing the room. "Harry tells me that you've pulled him from the Defence class, Cyril."

Cyril waved the question aside as though it were of no matter, all while pulling a chair over to the foot of the bed. "Regardless of the teacher, he never would have learned anything in that class. His time is better spent working with me."

Harry went back to the chair he had previously occupied, letting the two friends discuss the issue. While he was happy to be free of the small mind and dubious intelligence of the so-called witch masquerading as a Defence Lecturer, it was only a hardship to sit through her class in the sense that his patience was quite finite and his urge to hex her into oblivion was dangerously high.

"Be that as it may, by the rules of Hogwarts he must study Defence with an accredited instructor. If you wish him to avoid the class, you'll have to become so qualified, Cyril. You know the English Ministry has refused to recognise the credentials issued to those from the continent."

"Yes, yes, fine," Cyril said with more than a hint of irritation. "I'll make a note to have my credentials established here before too much can be made of this trifle."

Dumbledore frowned for a moment before glancing at Harry and then back to Cyril. "As we've discussed previously, you know that this trifle is a front for Fudge. Right now, Fudge has a solid base of popular support, and I am having doubts cast upon me for allowing young Harry to be here at all."



Cyril sighed slightly before waving vaguely in Harry's direction. "Yes, well, that all became slightly worse while you were napping. Fudge's administration is in a better position, and you are in a less tenable one, ever since Snape was sacked."

The silence was profound, with Dumbledore staring hard at Cyril, who was completely unfazed. Harry, however, was feeling confused regarding the content of Cyril's statement. He knew that Snape had been ousted, but the mechanisms that were employed should have been neutral to either Dumbledore or Fudge. While Harry understood that there was a widespread loathing for the man among those who had been students at Hogwarts during Snape's tenure for the past fifteen years, particularly so among those who had suffered from his so-called teaching style, Snape's removal had been ordained by the Wizengamot, not Hogwarts or the Ministry of Magic.

"So," Harry interjected into the silence, "you're implying that someone working for Fudge has claimed that it was a Ministry investigation, then, that booted Snape?"

Cyril nodded his head slowly, not removing his gaze from Dumbledore's. "It's quite the coincidence, when you think about it. You used Master Percival Weasley's school supply law, with Weasley siblings filing the complaint, against your Master Snape. At the same time, Master Weasley was promoted to Fudge's Assistant right before the verdict was delivered which revoked all of the man's teaching rights. Consider that twist with his popularity as a professor here for many years."

It was obvious to Harry, as Cyril had meant it to be, that Fudge could read the writing on the wall and had executed a rare sharp political move. By setting things up just right, it would seem like his own administration had been working behind the scenes to collect sufficient evidence to bring down a generally reviled lecturer at Hogwarts, clearing the way for a more suitable replacement while also winning the affection of a large fraction of the general populace's heartfelt thanks.

Harry knew that historically Fudge had been, prior to becoming Minister, very politically astute, but the man was so short-fused over

perceived challenges to his delusions of vice-regal authority that he typically came off as a complete idiot these days. The deftness of this particular manoeuvre left Harry wondering once again whether Fudge carried out his own plans or if someone else held the strings behind the Minister. The latter possibility made the most logical explanation, given the evidence and applying Occam's razor. When the Minister acted like a buffoon, he would likely be doing something a hypothetical controller was indifferent about, but when intelligent actions happened, it would be the opposite. While Harry and his mentors had been looking for decisive evidence to prove the theory either way regarding Fudge, to date they had turned up absolutely nothing. Alternately, the man could have been having an 'up' day on his bipolar swings, engaging the brain enough to actually do something, however late and little it might be.

"Right," Harry finally said. "Lots of fun implications."

Cyril nodded, obviously taking Harry's statement at face value. "What I wish to understand, Harry, is why you were striving so hard to remove Master Snape from the building."

It took Harry a few moments to realise that Cyril was actually waiting for an answer, and then only a few moments longer to recall that Cyril was not privy to the discussions and planning that had occurred under the guidance of Nicolas. It was a sobering thought that Cyril had been letting Harry carry on with his agenda without fully understanding the rules of the game, but it was also starting to become clear that Harry would be required to explain his actions before carrying them out in the future.

Since Snape was now firmly evicted, Harry knew that his oath required telling Dumbledore his motives before he could leave the infirmary. He had dreaded that first conversation with Dumbledore this morning, which had been the debacle he feared in some ways. Unfortunately, he harboured similar reservations about this new line of discussion and about his new Mentor Cyril publicly second-guessing the decisions his family had made long ago. "Errr," he offered quietly, "are you sure?"

In the face of extensive silence as a combined answer from the two men, Harry slouched somewhat lower in his seat. He was almost certain that Cyril was buffering up a bevy of topics to take him to task over in addition to learning of his plans, but most likely the worst parts would centre on his so-called 'hasty decisions' or 'failure to understand consequences'. He found it somewhat ironic that he, as her sort-of-mentor, had only this morning taken poor Ginny to task over her failure of imagination regarding spells, when that was almost exactly the reprimand he could expect from his own Mentor. Dumbledore, on the other hand, was more than likely to become quite upset with Harry - and, indirectly, Harry's supporting cast at home - for altogether different reasons when the requested set of details was laid out on the table.

Resigned to one more inevitable situation in a day of unpleasantness, Harry opted for the approach that Sirius tended to favour - pointed questions in obvious logic exercises. "All right, first, can either of you name all the suspected or formerly known-to-be Death Eaters that do not live under a Fidelius Charm and possibly an Unplottable Charm as well? Those who are still alive, at any rate?"

Neither of the men answered, but Harry could tell they were considering the topic carefully. He took their continued silence as tacit admission that no names would be forthcoming.

"And do either of you know where Riddle likes to hold his little social gatherings? The ones where he's not attacking some hapless Muggles or some Wizarding family?"

Dumbledore stirred slightly, but his eyes were cast down when Harry looked at him. With an obvious reluctance, the headmaster admitted to knowing some of the answers. "As we discussed many days past, Harry, I've been told by Severus of three distinct places . . . Malfoy Manor, somewhere near Newcastle, and a few times at Riddle Manor. Supposedly, he no longer would use the Little Hangleton area, yet that's where last summer's events took place."

Harry shrugged off the reference to the calamity that had shattered the balance of power in his life and forced the issue of finally attending Hogwarts. "Yes, well, I could have told you the same. In

fact, the only reason I didn't tell you that information during our previous chats was because you told it to me first." Harry paused to rise to his feet, restless in the confined room and unable to stop himself from pacing. "We didn't need old Snape for that, just a lot of hard work on our part."

Harry paced for another moment or two before turning abruptly to face the headmaster. "How do you locate a site under Fidelius? How do you find that which is Unplottable? How do you tag someone such that they are unaware of the tracking you are trying to do of their person?"

Dumbledore shook his head slowly, but Harry knew both he and Cyril had dealt with this problem in their colourful pasts. "Tell me, sir, did you ever find a way short of breaking the charms? Or of deep Legilimency scans to determine who is the Secret Keeper, and then again on that Keeper to find the location?" Harry turned to regard Cyril just as solemnly. "Or you, Cyril? Did you ever solve these problems in another way?"

The slowly shaking heads were more than sufficient answer, but Harry had no need to see them. He knew that those were the tried-and-true methods for bypassing such restrictions. You either had to pin down and break the Occlumency barriers of someone that knows the secret, such that you learn who the Secret Keeper is but not the secret itself, or else you have to stumble across the protected location and break the spells hiding it. Neither was a viable option if you were pressed for time, and just knowing the Secret Keeper was seldom useful as that person tended to be hiding rather thoroughly if you were looking in the first place.

Harry dropped back into the chair he had occupied previously, resting his head in his hands as he rubbed his temples. "We found a way - accidentally, actually - to get a direction on people that Apparate. The problem is that most people pop around for lots of reasons, and you don't know why someone is going somewhere in specific. Each time someone Apparates through the detector, it breaks it down a little bit, so it's of pretty limited use. And it's finicky to set up, as well."

Sighing, Harry leaned back in the chair to regard his Mentor and his headmaster. "It's impossible to track people when you don't know when or where they'll be. Plain tracking charms don't work properly inside protected locations, so you need a means of triangulation. Snape is the only Death Eater we could consistently locate, because he was hiding here in the castle. We needed him out there, where we could track him, to discover where he lives. We can then gradually discover where all the others live and, of course, ultimately find Riddle himself." Before either Dumbledore or Cyril could speak, Harry held up his hand. "Yes, yes, it's a risky proposition, but we all know that Snape will come and talk to Dumbledore regularly, one way or another. We can track him based on those meetings, and within three or four of them, we'll know exactly where he comes from. Then we do it again based on that location."

It was only scant seconds before Dumbledore was clearly angry. The shroud of loss in the man's eyes was still there but was reduced slightly by the anger displayed on his face. "You're telling me you just wanted to know where Severus lives? Where he goes? That's why you had him kicked out?"

"Hardly," Harry countered bluntly. "The man's a right bastard, and you know it. He had no business being here in the first place, abusing students left and right. He's actually useful out there, when the world knows he's been kicked out. He can't hide in your pocket anymore, he has to interact with the other Death Eaters, and he has to attend to Voldemort more frequently. He's got no excuse not to. That will give us information far more useful than anything he's told us so far."

"Albus," Cyril's voice cut across the room. "You're not thinking clearly on this. You've spent so much time trying to protect Master Snape that you've lost sight of the bigger picture in places. In this case, Harry is correct, although I don't entirely agree with his methods."

Dumbledore's scowl deepened, but Harry was happy to see him swallow the retort he had been about to deliver. Fawkes stirred slightly to trill for just a moment, further calming the headmaster, although the man was still clearly upset. Cyril turned his gaze on Harry, the eyes piercing in intensity. "Given the oaths you and Albus exchanged, you should have been more upfront with your plans."

While I agree that man has no business teaching, there may have been a better way to handle the outcome."

Dumbledore nodded briefly at this, his scowl lessening somewhat as Fawkes continued the song. "I can agree now that he was not a good teacher, but I think had we tried to coordinate better, we could have tracked him as he went to places for meetings we knew of."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe. But if you hadn't put up that strong fight to keep him at Hogwarts, then everyone would be suspicious as to what game was really being played, now wouldn't they? This way, even Snape is completely in the dark as to how he's helping us with the Dark."

"That does not justify your actions," Dumbledore countered, although his anger was clearly dissipating as he thought about the situation and Fawkes continued to work phoenix magic. "I could have told you where he lived, you realise?"

Harry snorted involuntarily, his sense of cynicism overpowering his tolerance for the point. "Right. I know where he lives during the summer, it's a place called Spinner's End. It says as much in the current edition of Hogwarts, A History. Think you can point it out on a map? Last I checked, it was under Fidelius and Unplottable, just like all the other Death Eater abodes."

Dumbledore was regarding Harry intently again, albeit without the scowl, but this time Harry just gave him a flat stare back. If the old man wanted to play second-guessing games, Harry would give him all the arguments he could handle. Fawkes settled back down into silence, and the staring contest came to an abrupt halt as everyone watched the bird tuck its head down and become still.

Cyril, if anything, seemed faintly amused. "As I said, I don't fully agree with you. What about the Weasleys, Harry? Where do they fit into your plans?"

Harry scratched his head momentarily, reflecting on how to safely answer that question. "Fate owes me a thing or two, and apparently she decided to cough up a partial payment." Harry rolled his eyes

theatrically for a moment. "I can't say I care for her sense of humour, though. The twins are overly fixated on some things, you know?"

Dumbledore's lingering disapproval turned into a faint smile at Harry's observation, but the headmaster waved the commentary away with his good hand. "Appearances, Harry, are rarely quite correct. What you have done is not likely to be undone. Now that you've pushed Severus out, what are your plans?"

Harry was stumped for a moment. He had revealed some hints along those lines, but it was unclear if he was required to answer the point blank question by his oath. At the same time, he knew what the original agenda called for next, but enough things had transpired with the schedule so firmly botched that it was impossible to be sure what they actually would do next. While he was wondering what Remus, Sirius, and Edgar might have in mind, he remembered the note from his Transporter Box that he had stuffed into his robes unopened before training with Ginny. Ignoring the looks of curiosity from both Cyril and Dumbledore, Harry pulled the letter out and broke the seal, reading quickly.

Harry -

We've confirmed the bat's hideouts. Strange post problems, but we're working on the holes. Has quite the selection of beverages and what not. Left suddenly, returned with a wee, but there was too much interference. We've got some field work to do, and you've not got a Potions instructor anymore. Your luxurious suite at the palace awaits you, so shoot for 1 pm and be ready - it'll be a long day.

- The Unwanted

Chuckling, Harry casually touched his wand tip to the parchment, setting it on fire and letting it burn to ash before vanishing the mess on the floor. "It would appear that Snape's moved into the Hog's Head Inn for now and has taken quite the collection of potions and ingredients with him. I do hope those weren't school supplies, sir." Harry did not even bother trying to hide his smirk. "That said, the fellow's been keeping some strange habits and schedules of late, and

that's made us curious. I guess the next step will be to scratch that itch."

Dumbledore said nothing for a long time, as he apparently chose to regard his bedclothes instead. Harry and Cyril exchanged a mutual glance of resignation, knowing that the headmaster was deeply buried in his own mind and would talk to them when he had reached his own conclusions. Dumbledore would frequently pause in reflection during a conversation, but it was very infrequent for him to go into a deep introspection over some topic. Harry had witnessed this many times since Cyril's arrival, but it usually was in reaction to some exchange between the two older men. While this was not the first time Harry had directly triggered this type of introspection, it was uncommon, and they both knew they had several minutes of silence to look forward to.

"Harry," Dumbledore cautiously began, "you must realise by now that it is not possible for a secret that has ever been uttered or written to remain a true secret." The headmaster's gaze rose and locked with Harry's. "Do you understand the consequences of your actions?"

That was, Harry knew, the ultimate question. His exchange of oaths with Dumbledore was already a demonstration that, despite what you know, or think you know, the consequences of any single act are beyond comprehension for anyone. While the ripple-effect may be large or small, ultimately so many things will change that the fundamental question was meaningless. Then, of course, Cyril had been badgering him on that same topic, either obliquely through the mirror or else directly through pointed books and statements. "As well as anyone can, most likely. No one can understand the full impact of anything, sir."

"And what of first-order understanding?"

"I certainly hope so," Harry muttered. "Those things that I can plan for, I do. And as often as I can, I do so with the input from others."

Dumbledore nodded slowly, as though this set of answers was entirely expected. "Perhaps your experience and background gives



you a bit of bias, Harry. I'm not convinced you do actually grasp the full first-order effects."

"In what way? I assume we are still talking about Snape, here?"

Dumbledore shook his head briefly. "Not really, Harry. Not really." With a sigh, he looked back at Cyril briefly before turning to contemplate the ceiling. "And now I must find a new Potions Master, before the students suffer further."

Cyril's abrupt snort caused Dumbledore to look back at him. "Minerva already took care of that." Harry was curious to see how well the headmaster would react to the news that Cyril was about to unleash in his typical manner. He was unsure why exactly his Mentor had such a dislike of the man about to be discussed, but he knew that if he watched Dumbledore, he would have a solid second data point to consider. "That would-be hermit-like fellow is coming back - Master Slughorn." Cyril's delivery was so dry, Harry wondered just how his Mentor said it without tripping on his own tongue.

"Indeed?" Harry was unclear on what two raised eyebrows meant from the headmaster, as no other facial expression came with them. "She contacted Horace?"

"Unless he contacted her, yes," Cyril said with a faint hint of disgust. "Supposedly, just until the end of the academic year."

"How fortunate," Dumbledore said quietly. "I've been meaning to have a long talk with Horace ever since Harry and I had our little introductory meeting two weeks ago. When is he arriving?"

"Tomorrow," was Cyril's curt response. "What could possibly make you want to talk to him?"

Dumbledore went back to studying the ceiling for a moment, but his eyes drifted back to meet Harry's quickly. "I've always been curious where Tom Riddle learned some of things he did, and Horace was one of Tom's professors. I've been curious to find out what they may have talked about outside of class."

Harry was unable to resist leaning forward at that statement, surprised that the circle of teachers at Hogwarts was so small that they would be stepping substantially backward in time to replace Snape, rather than taking a contemporary peer - although hopefully it would have been a peer that was capable of teaching. "What makes you think that Riddle was friendly with Slughorn?"

"Professor Slughorn," Dumbledore quietly rebuked him. "I dare say you'll find out why when you finally meet Horace, Harry. Almost from his first year here, Tom was well on his path to Head Boy - you could see it about him. He was incredibly gifted and intelligent, and his innate understanding of magic has been like no other I've met since." Dumbledore paused for a moment, peering at Harry over his glasses. "Although perhaps I shall have to revise that and say that Remus has quite possibly surpassed Tom by now in understanding magic."

"Ah, I wouldn't know," Harry offered. "I only saw Remus and Tom fight briefly last summer, and at that point, none of us were doing very well."

Cyril's voice broke the ensuing silence, which in a way Harry was quite grateful for as it provided a distraction from memories he wanted to avoid. "I asked you before, Harry, how well your plans were being executed since you came to Hogwarts. Do you have a better answer for me yet?"

Harry wanted to toss a hex or two at his Mentor, but he knew that would only delay the inevitable. It was bad timing, as far as Harry was concerned, since he had very little desire for Dumbledore to witness his impending chastisement from Cyril. "Not really. It all fell apart when I got ambushed outside the Headmaster's office."

"And do you know why you lost control of things?" Cyril's tone was ever so slightly mocking, and it was pitched just right to be incredibly irritating.

"I'm not sure." Harry paused to glance at Dumbledore, who had a pensive expression on his face. Cyril was looking at Harry as though he had failed some simple task, which did not help his disposition. "After the battle, we didn't have the time to fully think of the public

backlash or how to nullify it. It was too unexpected, too sudden, we couldn't plan for it. Before the battle, I failed to consider the true threat level here."

Cyril shrugged absently. "Partially right and partially wrong. There are lessons here, Harry. We shall talk more about this when I am free of . . . this facility. Perhaps we should discuss the ring, Albus, and not waste more time on things that will ultimately -"

Harry whirled almost perfectly in sync with Cyril as they levelled their wands at the doors into the room, which had suddenly reformed with a loud squelching noise. As a faint, hollow booming sounded from the doors, Harry chanced a glance at his watch, and noted that it was just now noon. "That's the bell, gentlemen." Harry waved his wand a few times, releasing the layered Imperturbable Charms from the walls. "Madam Pomfrey warned me she'd be calling right about now."

As the doors pushed open, Harry was surprised to see not only Madam Pomfrey enter but also the mysterious Healer he had heard McGonagall and Cyril arguing about before. Before he could fully realise what was going on, the Hogwarts mediwitch had Dumbledore under her wand, sweeping the man with diagnostic spells, while the Healer deftly cornered Cyril.

"I don't recall giving you permission for magic use, Cyril," the attractive Healer said in a tone that Harry knew he had heard before from Madam Pomfrey. The words were simple, but the voice was quite firm and conveyed more clearly than any reproachful words could that no nonsense would be tolerated. "And how much have you been exerting yourself?"

Cyril's flat look at the woman's questions was roundly ignored as she started her own diagnostic scans of him. "You know," she quietly muttered as she moved around him, "I had been planning on releasing you tomorrow morning if you were behaving." She paused near Cyril's back and spent a few moments casting additional diagnostics. "Why is it that you Auror types are so dreadful at following simple instructions?"

Harry was fighting a grin that was threatening to escape as he had a front-row seat to observing two highly respected and revered men being treated as obstinate children under the stern wands of the clearly competent witches. While Madam Pomfrey was not saying anything aloud, it was clear she was doing just as thorough an examination of the headmaster, if not more so, than what Cyril was receiving.

Harry's amusement, however, came to an abrupt end when Cyril caught Harry smirking. "Healer Worthy," Cyril said quite formally, "allow me to introduce my Apprentice, Harry Potter." The woman looked around Cyril, her dark eyes going wide momentarily. "As his Mentor, it would be remiss of me not to point out that Harry, too, was grievously injured this weekend past. I would appreciate your checking him over as well."

Madam Pomfrey sniffed loudly, never turning from Dumbledore. Harry thought he might even see a faint smile on the headmaster's face at Cyril's request. "Really," Madam Pomfrey said quietly, "I did heal him, Cyril. Are you casting aspersions on my skills?"

Healer Worthy shot a look at the mediwitch that Harry did not understand before she stepped away from Cyril and turned to regard Harry. Cyril, however, merely bestowed a gracious smile on Pomfrey. "Not at all, Poppy. However, it would be well for Harry to have an alternate Healer familiar with him, should something happen to him and you are somehow unavailable."

Harry wanted to groan and possibly hex his Mentor for a moment. The man's argument was at least superficially sound, but Harry knew there would be even more reasons behind the request, at least one of which would include reminding Harry to not be smug in front of others. "Healer Worthy," he inclined his head slightly. "A pleasure to meet you."

She raised one eyebrow but had not moved from her position. "Mr. Potter," she finally acknowledged him. "I'm surprised to find you so polite, given what my aunt has told me in passing." She flashed him a

brief smile before glancing quickly at Cyril. "Do you feel as though you need to be checked for anything?"

It took quite a bit of effort, but Harry did manage to suppress his smirk this time. "Not particularly, Healer Worthy. However, if you think it's best, feel free to check anyway." Harry had firmly launched the ball back to her and was curious to see which way she would lean - would she dutifully follow Cyril's implied demand, or would she simply wave it off as unnecessary since Madam Pomfrey already made it clear she had checked him? It was one of those wonderful tests of fundamental character and trust that nothing beyond the requirements of medical aid would be used. That thought caused Harry to reflect again as to the real reasons Cyril had made his request.

"Oh, just check him already," Madam Pomfrey commented somewhat irritably as she handed potions to the headmaster. "Even if I checked him a few hours ago, he's probably landed himself back in trouble since then. He seems the type."

When the Healer again looked at him with one eyebrow raised, Harry just shrugged with a faint smile. "Perhaps," was all he offered. Apparently, it was invitation enough, as she walked over and began her diagnostic scan on Harry directly.

Madam Pomfrey ignored everyone at that point, pressing the ubiquitous and uniquely coloured Dreamless Sleep Potion onto the headmaster with demands that he get more rest. Apparently, the after effects of the battle and unexpected magical trauma were going to keep the headmaster in the infirmary for at least the next few days.

As Healer Worthy worked, Harry was surprised to hear her whispering to him. "I wouldn't have done this, you know, but Poppy forced the issue. My aunt is your Professor McGonagall, and she mentioned a few things to me in passing yesterday." The pretty Healer paused and cast quite a few diagnostics on Harry's left arm. In a normal voice that was somewhat abrupt in its delivery, she all but demanded, "What happened here?"

Harry looked down at the scar running the length of the inside of his left forearm, very close to the radial artery. The extended frown of the

Healer told Harry that she was very unhappy to see that, but he was at a loss as to why. "Err, it's a souvenir from a fight. I don't think you're cleared for that information. Sorry."

"This was inflicted by someone else?"

Harry nodded blankly, not quite seeing the point. It was just a plain knife wound. When she relaxed visibly, he looked at Cyril, but Cyril only shook his head briefly, which Harry took to mean the topic was not to be discussed.

"Very well." Healer Worthy moved on, pausing again briefly behind him. "What are the old wounds on your back and legs, Mr Potter?"

Harry knew better than to react to the question, so he simply shrugged. "Sorry, privileged," was all he returned. This time, Harry kept his eyes on the window, ignoring the looks from both his mentor and his headmaster.

After completing the sweep around him, she stopped again in front of him with her wand pointed directly at the centre of his forehead. "I see only two problems. One, your scar. It's not acting like a scar should. I assume you're aware of this, and it can't be healed?" When Harry nodded, she continued on. "Two, you have a nearly perfect circular bruise in the centre of your forehead. It's recent, less than four hours old. Would you like it healed? It's going to be quite the visual if you prefer to keep it."

Harry smiled slightly, suddenly glad that he had not objected overtly to the check-up. "Yes, that was a reminder from this morning to not take the environment for granted. I'd be quite grateful if you could fix that."

Two flicks of her wand later, Harry became aware of the loss of faint tension in his forehead. It had been almost too little to actively notice, but with its sudden departure, he was quite aware of the fact that it had been there. He needed to think of a suitable reward for a certain redhead, but he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

"Thank you," Harry said quietly.

"You're welcome, Mr Potter. And now, if you would be so good as to leave us, we have to do a more careful inspection of our patients. I trust you'll take some lunch downstairs?"

Harry caught a resigned nod from Cyril before he smiled at the woman in front of him. Looking over at Madam Pomfrey, who was watching them, he was amused to see her shake her head. "Your conversation with the headmaster will have to resume tomorrow, Mr Potter. He's going to be sleeping quite a bit until then, as the restoration potions will drain his energy. At his age, it's best to do it this way."

Nodding his understanding, Harry turned back to the Healer. "It was a pleasure to meet you. I'll be sure to compliment Professor McGonagall on her excellent niece." With a quick wink, Harry was out of the doors and headed back to the Great Hall.

Tue, 12 Sep 1995, 12:56

Hermione had been somewhat annoyed when Harry told her he would not be available for the Potions Tutoring session that day, but he was unsure if it was due to her desire to actually teach him something or the lost opportunity to grill him on something else. He had seen her surreptitiously trying to do spells with the wrong words since the revelations in the hospital wing, but thus far she had yet to even make random things happen.

Ginny had given him a good-natured glare over his perceived abuses on her personage during Transfiguration. When he merely winked at her, she hissed quietly that she was most emphatically not property to be manhandled at his whim, even if she understood his intent to 'instruct' her. Harry had briefly considered the point, giving her a shrug at the time, and then ignored her feigned petulance. She, in turn, switched tack and instead actively participated in the conversation he began with Neville and the twins over the best way to either implode or explode a cauldron in Potions class. Hermione refused to contribute, even when Harry said he was just trying to get some Potions tutoring in during lunch, but her faint smirk at some of

the more outlandish suggestions told him she was not really upset over the situation. Ron had laughed out loud at some of them but had refrained from injecting his own ideas or opinions. Finishing lunch with time to spare, Harry waved his goodbyes before heading back to his suite to pick up his broom.

He cast the habitual Disillusionment Charm on himself and his broom before he left the suite, riding relatively slowly on the broom once he went through his bedroom window. The low speed helped to avoid making too much displacement in the air as he flew toward the Whomping Willow. That particular giveaway would let others know that something was going on around them, and he had learned a long time ago not to provide such vital clues.

As he slipped past the Willow and into the tunnel, Harry heard the sounds of faint wailing coming from the shack at the other end of the passage. He recognised both of the distinct wails he could hear, and he knew that there was no danger or distress - just two friends blowing off some steam and amusing themselves while waiting for Harry to show up.

When he finally climbed out of the passage and up to the area that would have been a front room in a non-shack dwelling, Harry found Padfoot sitting in one of three worn and abused chairs, howling at nothing in particular. Remus was sitting in another chair, trying to match the sounds Padfoot was making with his hands cupped around his face.

"Harry!" Remus called as soon as he finally saw Harry laughing at them. Harry had to give him credit, since Remus showed no embarrassment at having been caught in such an act. "Sirius, change back, Harry's here."

"So this is what you called me out here for, then?" Harry asked as he dropped into the beat-up chair opposite Remus and the now reformed Sirius.

"Naturally," Sirius grinned at him. "How's school, kiddo?"



For his part, Harry could feel his grin slip away as he sighed and looked at the floor. "Kinda rough. Dumbledore woke up, and we talked a bit. I don't really want to get into it right now, since I just finished with him before lunch." Looking up at his friends, Harry could see both of them looked as uncomfortable as he felt when he had received the note from Madam Pomfrey that started the whole ensuing discussion. Shaking off the mixed feelings, Harry tried to focus the conversation on the situation. "What do you two reprobates want with me today?"

"More of the same." Remus paused to vaguely wave out the poorly boarded up windows, giving Harry a sympathetic glance at the same time. Harry was just glad that Remus seemed to be willing to let the Dumbledore issues slide for the moment. "It's a big town, and lots of people pass through it regularly. I'm going to lay down a full set of mapping grid charms, or at least as much as I can this afternoon. I'll start from the Hog's Head and work my way out. You, Harry, get to set up the Apparition Flow Field. Sirius is going to play back-up if something unexpected happens to either of us."

Harry chuckled at Remus' turn of phrase. "Something unexpected? Like what, a drunken brawl that spills into the streets? Don't you mean if open warfare erupts? That seems to be more my luck."

Sirius just shook his head as he chuckled along with Harry. Remus was clearly none too chuffed with their amusement, but Harry knew that his friend was laughing on the inside as well.

"Very well, Harry," Remus finally ground out in mock anger, "if you wind up picking another fight with Dumbledore or Voldemort, Sirius will come out and hold your water bottle, and I'll come over to keep score. Happy now?"

"Yeah, good enough," Harry smiled. "Are you going to explain more about that note, or do I just set up the Field all over the Hog's Head?"

Remus shook his head and pointed lazily at Harry's godfather. "I was sleeping off last night, talk to that mutt over there."

Sirius grumbled a bit at the denigration from Remus, but apparently chose to act superior rather than succumb to the taunt. "Actually," Sirius pointed out, "Edgar's the one that saw most of it. I just came along at dawn to relieve him."

"Hmmm. Where is Edgar, anyway?" Harry asked as he looked back and forth between the two of them. "I would think he'd be here in person to gloat and preen."

Remus shook his head briefly. "He's been using too much of his power lately, Harry. He had to skip out for a bit before he gets the hunger going again. I expect we'll see him by Friday if nothing urgent comes up."

"Okay. So what did Edgar find out, then, Sirius?"

"Well, he was hanging around the Hog's Head in his alternate form; you know how much he enjoys that. Apparently old Snape got a summons, as he Apparated straight out of the pub area." Sirius paused to smile grandly at Harry, which was something Harry distinctly recalled telling his godfather was an annoying habit. "Like anyone with a bit of curiosity, he took that time to go browse Snape's room. As he put it, there are enough potions and ingredients stored away up there to open a couple of shops."

Harry exchanged a quick glance with Remus, but it was obvious his friend already knew these details, as his expression remained serene. Turning back to Sirius, Harry thought he might as well play along by asking the obvious questions. "That's to be expected, though. He's a Potions Master, after all."

Sirius made a see-sawing motion with one hand as he drew out his reaction just to annoy Harry. "Maybe, but we don't know what potions he's got up there, do we? Edgar certainly can't identify them, but that's not the point. Edgar also found a few books, nothing too interesting. But do you know what he didn't find up there?"

Harry just rolled his eyes and waited for Sirius to decide when the suspense had been built up sufficiently.

"Right," Sirius said with a grin. "Neither do we. The whole thing, according to Edgar, was freakishly neat and orderly, completely unlike his cave at Hogwarts."

"Maybe because he's only been living there a couple of days?" Harry asked as dryly as he could manage. "Even you take a week or two to make a mess, Padfoot, but at least you're paper trained."

"Very funny," Sirius said with a frown, ignoring the amused chuckles emitting from Remus. "Snape got back around four in the morning. I showed up at six, and Edgar flew off into the twilight. The only other thing of note that happened was the morning post. Snape received several birds all at once, seven of them, and they were all loaded down. Within three or four minutes, six were back out the window just as loaded with material. The seventh left after an hour or so, but it was fully loaded too."

"Interesting," Harry observed while sitting up straight and thinking fast. "Did you get any Tracking Charms on them?"

Sirius looked completely offended at the question. "I may be a bit older than you are, Harry, but I'm not a complete invalid. Of course I did!"

Sighing, Harry just waited his godfather out. He knew Sirius would play the mock emotional wound angle for all it was worth, bordering on nearly lugubrious self-pity. When they had first 'evacuated' Sirius from Azkaban, they had all hovered over him excessively, trying to get him back into some semblance of health and hoping that he might recover from years of neglect and abuse at the prison. It had taken the man all of five seconds to comprehend the change of fortunes and milk it for all he could. These days, his random attempts to revive the behaviour were a study in reminding them all of how well he had out-pranked them - once.

"Right, right, old-but-not-totally-useless, do go on." Harry adopted his wide-eyed innocent-child look, which only caused his friend to growl slightly.

"They all vanished after a while," Sirius ground out while glaring at Harry and Harry's eager school-child demeanour. "Into one of the four areas we think may be Spinner's End."

Harry knew the grin on his face had to match the evil grins on both Remus and Sirius. "Now that is interesting. What else?"

"That's it," Sirius shrugged. Harry watched him reach down onto the ground and pull out a giant sheet of parchment, unfurling it across the floor and keeping it down with some light Sticking Charms. "This is the map paper, already prepared. For the next step, it's up to the two of you."

Harry paused to look back at Remus. "Snape is still in there?"

Remus nodded. "We've no idea if he's awake or not, in his room or the pub, or what. All we know is he hasn't left, and no one has Apparated in. I guess he might have used the Floo Network to go somewhere, but that's something we all know he hates doing."

Harry sighed mournfully, aiming for the full effect. "That sucks. I know I can't extirpate him, but can I maim him? Just a little?"

"Harry," Remus chided with an air of patience, "you know you can't do that until we don't need him anymore."

"Fine, fine, deny me my fun. So I'll do the Field around the building, but not inside since Snape's still around. Meet back here before five? I've still got to go home, after all, for some physical training."

Remus and Sirius exchanged a glance before they both nodded. "Sounds about right," Remus said.

Tue, 12 Sep 1995, 16:41

Harry had spent his afternoon in the sun, doing tediously slow wand work under multiple Disillusionment and Notice-Me-Not Charms. One of the side effects of learning magic differently from everyone else that went through a traditional curriculum like Hogwarts offered was that sometimes you made completely wild mistakes. Of course, in his

opinion, everything was heavily complicated given that he was learning in a decidedly non-traditional manner while they were simultaneously trying to decipher how magic itself functioned.

Studying the theory rigorously had advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, when you made a mistake, it required a lot of discussion and reworking to learn where the mistake actually came from. Was it the wand movement, the incantation, the power focus, or something completely separate like standing in the wrong spot? The possible sources of error were simply staggering.

When considered from another angle, however, sometimes those mistakes had value in them. In this particular case, Harry had been trying to cast the Anti-Disapparition Jinx and practicing the effectiveness with Remus in an open field, coincidentally not too far from Hogsmeade. His first few attempts had been completely useless, not inhibiting Remus from moving about in the least. It required a deep re-thinking on the tenets behind Apparition and how to stop it.

The key to successful Apparition had less to do with the so-called Three D's and far more to do with understanding Newtonian and Einsteinian mechanics. To move from one place to another, you had to create a channel through space, essentially boring a hole from where you were to where you wanted to be. The magical force kept that hole drilled but void of all material. To Apparate, you first had to bore the channel to the target location, and then you had to transpose yourself for an equal volume of air from the other side of the bore. It made for a very unpleasant, tight fit, and wound up displacing a good bit of air in a non-instantaneous manner, leaving a tell-tale noise in proportion to distance, speed, and bore diameter. Given the amount of energy it took to drill a small bore across short distances, the idea of using a larger diameter to reduce noise or accelerate the transport was abhorrent.

To restrict Apparition via the Anti-Disapparition Jinx, you in effect constructed a type of ward that would inhibit the initial bore drilling. Unable to dig a channel to a destination through the barrier, Apparition was understood to be impossible. Harry's interesting mistake that day had been to make the bore-deflection aspect too weak, such that the fine mesh netting of magical power lines could be

punched through relatively easily. The unexpected side effect, which made it an interesting mistake, was that the frayed ends of the mesh extruded out in the perfect pattern and direction of the bore channel, giving anyone with the ability to understand it a rather large indicator of which area someone was moving to. Repeated applications of a deliberately weakened jinx in different locations would, in fact, act as a full triangulation system, locating places that would otherwise be impossible to find.

As with any new discovery, it took very little time to find the inherent weakness of the idea. As more Apparitions were carried through the mesh, it eventually dissolved under the frayed energy couplings, and all the information 'stored' in the mesh was lost. Once they had hit upon the idea of using the mesh as a type of tracking device, it had taken quite a bit of time to work out how to reflect the mesh status back onto a version of the infamous Marauder's Map of Eagle's Nest. Of course, it was mostly useless at home, but it had been a proof-of-concept and was quite rewarding when completed.

The other drawback they found as they started applying the method to attempt locating known former Death Eaters was that it took a long time to cast a mesh over any large area. Just encompassing the designated safe Apparition point at home had taken almost an hour and had left Harry drained for quite some time. Granted, he had been younger, but it would be nearly impossible to instrument all of Hogsmeade with the tracking mesh.

This left Harry sitting back in the beat up chair at the Shrieking Shack, grateful to be off his feet and in the relative cool of the shady building interior, nursing a cold butterbeer that Sirius had handed to him when he returned. Remus and Sirius were perched on the edge of their respective chairs, intently studying the beginnings of a Marauder's Map of Hogsmeade. The Hog's Head Inn was fully marked on the outside, and the surrounding town for a few streets in every direction was completely active. The glowing lines indicating the Apparition Flow Field were pulsing softly around the building, but so far no one had punched through the webbing.

"You know, Remus, I have this whole list of things I've been meaning to talk to you about," Harry said as they sat idly, all watching the

parchment somewhat owlshly. "This would probably be a good time, but damned if I can remember any of them. And some of them were questions others raised."

"You should write them down," Remus pointed out. "Then you wouldn't need to remember them."

"That thought has already occurred to me, but then I have to remember to carry around some paper and a pen, or where I last left them." Harry paused to finally glance at his watch. "Well, gents, it's been fun, but I've got a man to see who wants to beat me bloody."

Harry stood up and clapped Sirius on the back. His godfather gave him a brief one-armed hug, never taking his eyes off the parchment.

Remus waved vaguely, his eyes never leaving the parchment in front of him either. "We won't be home for dinner. And give my regards to Master Gata, Harry," he called out right before Harry reached to activate his Portkey.

Before he made full contact with his watch, however, he had a sudden feeling of vertigo and a flash of sharp pain through his left arm. Without quite realising it, he was sitting on the floor, and Remus was holding his shoulders. Sirius was clearly trying to observe them but not actually look away from the map.

"Harry?" Remus asked. "Alright there?"

Harry took a moment to collect himself mentally. The sensations had been both very alien and very fleeting. "Yeah," he said quietly. "I think . . . Hedwig just got hurt."

"Is she okay?" Remus' voice was laced with worry, but Harry was uncertain precisely why. He knew that Remus refused to let him bring Hedwig to Hogwarts, and even if the explanations had been lacking, his friend was so adamant that Harry had just given in to the idea.

"Dunno, Remus." Harry climbed to his feet slowly. "I only ever get flashes, so it's hard to say. I need to go check on her."

"Harry," Remus said while still holding his shoulder firmly. "If anything is wrong, or anything feels suspicious, come right back, alright?"

Harry nodded, and Remus moved back over to sit by Sirius. With a swift motion, he activated the Portkey home.

Tue, 12 Sep 1995, 21:04

As Harry crossed the entrance hall and moved up the first main staircase, he was contemplating what he might work on with Ginny in the morning. Aside from some magical duelling and basic theory practice, he would need to work on some of her strength issues as well. Before he could fully settle on anything, however, he found his path suddenly blocked.

A large, hulking, clanking suit of armour was standing at the top of the stairs, a lance lowered precipitously down at Harry's face. It took Harry a moment to realise it, but traditional English suits of armour were quite small - knights and what-not being malnourished and underfed, they were at most five feet tall and small change. This suit of armour, however, was easily seven feet tall, and the tip of the lance was for war, not sport.

"Right," Harry offered brightly, glancing around for a moment. "None shall pass, eh?"

The armour said nothing but began descending the stairs slowly, the lance never deviating from a precise path to his nose.

"Would an apology do?" Harry tried conversationally, as he stepped to the far left side of the staircase.

The armour clearly had no tolerance for anything other than chastisement, or perhaps lugging him off to someone else for discipline, but Harry had no interest in being waylaid in such a scurrilous manner. The suit clanked down one more step. "And so it is," he offered quietly.

With a fast and silent spell, he turned the entire right half of the main staircase into a sheet of ice. In a matter of moments, the suit of



armour was slowly sliding down the staircase, gathering momentum, and Harry casually ducked under the lance tip that went past. When the armour crashed disturbingly loudly onto the hard floor at the bottom of the stairs, it spread out into several pieces and lay immobile.

"Problems, Harry?" Harry looked up to see Ginny Weasley paused in the corridor above the stairs, her red hair flowing over the banister as she leaned out to regard him. She was some yards from the top of the staircase itself.

"No, no problems," Harry said casually as he climbed up to meet her. "Just testing how well those slick steel boots in armour work on ice."

Ginny quirked one eyebrow and then slowly shook her head. "Does everything you do focus on fighting, Harry?"

"Only on Tuesdays," he offered with a wink.

"I thought you were supposed to be in detention every night until, well, forever," Ginny offered with a wry look around, presumably searching for teachers.

"Ah, a funny thing, that," Harry said as he fell in step beside her. "You see, Dumbledore assigned me detention on a monthly basis to a person, not a title. The way I see it, if I'm not seen during the hours a detention might be carried out, why advertise the opportunity to give me a new one? As Filch and Snape are gone at the moment, well, I guess I'll just have to punish myself."

"Really? And what do you think is appropriate punishment?"

Harry smirked. "Reading up on some magical theory of transfiguration, thwarting tomorrow's efforts of your brothers, and maybe scheduling a little mayhem myself."

Ginny clucked disapprovingly. "You're never going to win friends at this rate, Harry. And don't forget, my mum should be sending you a letter or some such in the morning."

"You assume I want some friends, Ginny, and I'm rather looking forward to hearing from your mum. What are you doing out and about, anyway?" Harry asked as they slowly walked toward both Gryffindor Tower and his suite. "Based on your comments this morning, I thought you'd be buried in work."

Ginny said nothing in response for a while, her hands stuffed deeply in her robes, as she plodded along at his side. He was pleased to see her keep her eyes up, however, even if she was walking in a slouch.

"Detention with Umbridge," she finally offered quietly when they were somewhere near the fifth floor.

"Oh? What for?"

Ginny shrugged at his question, which made it clear that she had no interest in explaining. "Where are you coming back from this time, Harry? It seems like you're always off the castle grounds whenever I'm trying to find you."

Harry found himself watching Ginny very closely, as he wondered how much she was tracking his movements. "Home."

"Everything okay, then?"

Harry said nothing for a moment as he continued to wonder why she was being inquisitive. "Mostly. My owl broke her wing in some freak accident while hunting, but otherwise, yeah."

"Oh. I'm sorry, Harry." Ginny's voice had an odd quality to it, and he wondered what precisely was going on with her. "Why isn't your owl here?"

Harry shrugged absently, feeling slightly uncomfortable with the line of questioning. Hedwig had broken her wing in an apparently failed hunting dive, and it was a nasty break. It was also true that she had hit a rock when she landed, but Hedwig never had hunting problems before. He was worried something might really be wrong with his companion. "She's not allowed. I can't really explain it, sorry."

They continued on in silence for a while before Ginny spoke up again. "Harry, in that book on magic theory, what's it mean by 'natural talent' when it talks about conduits?"

"In reference to what?"

"Healing, I think," she said while rubbing the side of her nose with her left hand. "Something about too much damage reducing any natural talent or the like."

They passed the gargoyle outside the Headmaster's office, but this time its expression did not change as they walked past. "Did you make up with it, Harry?"

"Hardly," Harry offered, his voice dropping to match her quiet tones. "That thing's got a mind of its own." Harry stopped to look at the gargoyle, admiring both the stonework and faint magical aura radiating from the sentry.

"Why don't they ever show all four of the Founders in other places?"

Ginny's question caught Harry off balance, and he looked around to see her in turn looking at the static painting on the wall by the Headmaster's staircase. The four Founders of Hogwarts were there, dressed regally, and regarding everything with an air of power that was conveyed even by a painting that had no motion in it. Ginny was studying the figures, but Harry found himself either watching her or else looking closely at the faces of the four. There was something subtle in the difference between their faces and hers.

"Maybe if they had a magical painting, they'd spend all their time fighting?" Harry speculated after a moment. There was something odd in the way each Founder was holding their head, and it only stood out when he compared it to the faint scowl Ginny was wearing.

"Probably. I'd be tempted to give Slytherin a hex or two if he was off in a painting somewhere, though."

Harry chuckled. "That's another excellent reason to not leave their portraits about. Someone probably feels that way about each of

them." Harry focused more closely on the facial expressions of Slytherin and Gryffindor in the painting. "Ginny? Does it seem to you like they're almost disgusted with being in the painting, or is it just me?"

"Hmmm." The redhead stood quietly for a moment. "I think it's just you. They look like they're trying to be regal, but it doesn't quite work right, does it? It's almost as if they didn't like each other when this was made."

Harry shrugged absently. "Well I certainly don't want to be in a painting. Shall we?" As he moved back onto the path for Gryffindor Tower, she fell in step beside him quietly. "Going back to your question on the theory book, Ginny, you're still in the introduction. Keep reading, and it will explain talents and recessives as you get further in."

"Wait, there really are specific talents?"

Harry sighed before he glanced at the redhead. "Obviously. Metamorphmagi, for example, are exhibiting a talent. Animagi exhibit a different, albeit similar, one. I'm sure you know of quite a few others."

Ginny stopped and gave Harry a frown when he halted in turn to regard her. "That's not what I'm talking about, Harry. The way it's been written sounds like people have generic talents, some kind of special abilities, not that they have those kinds of extremely rare abilities at birth." Ginny paused as she watched Harry's face closely. "It reads as if it's almost commonplace or something."

For his part, Harry chuckled at her question. "Right. I'm sure you mean that to sound other than how you said it. You're not wanting to tell Animagi and so on that they're all a bunch of freaks, now are you?"

Ginny said nothing in return, but her look conveyed more than enough. Harry just waved vaguely and resumed walking, and she fell in beside him again.

"The word 'talent' is possibly misleading this early. Better to say, perhaps, 'affinity' or something along those lines," Harry explained as they continued on their path. "You have to understand how conduits work, and how magic works, to understand that some groupings or clusters mean that you might have an easier time with Charms as compared to Transfiguration, for example. That doesn't even get into what a wand does."

They walked in silence until they finally approached the painting of the Fat Lady. The lady herself made no effort to conceal her distaste for Harry, doing her best to glare at him from fifteen feet away and obviously preparing to rant further at him as soon as he approached close enough. "So it's really an ordinary natural talent, then, not some super power?"

Harry smirked for a moment. "Right. Super powers. Why is everyone obsessed with the idea of obtaining more power? If you can't use it right, it doesn't matter how much you've got."

Ginny looked surprised for a split second before she flashed him a wicked smile. "And you're intimately familiar with that topic, then, are you?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "It's a natural talent, right? While we're playing twenty questions, Weasley, what's the deal with the Venomous Tentacula?"

Ginny's wicked smile rapidly melted into open curiosity. "What Tentacula, Harry?"

If Harry had been susceptible to the effect of artful innocent looks or gazing up from behind long eyelashes, he might have been tempted to let her off the hook. Having been on the receiving end of many such attempts from Tonks in various guises, however, he was more than capable of shrugging her contrived expression aside. "Right. You didn't encourage Neville to 'skip up a bit' in his schedule, perhaps to more dangerous plants, and you surely didn't decide to up the ante with the tutoring for Hagrid's class in the hopes I'd get smeared."

Ginny's look, if anything, became even more artful and innocent. "Me? Harry, why would I? I want you to train me, after all. I wouldn't want to see you grievously injured or anything."

Harry gave her a level look, doing his best to approximate Remus when he was fed up with the line of garbage Sirius was passing off as an excuse. Ginny had apparently been through the entire routine before as well, as the look he gave her had no discernable impact whatsoever. "Mmmm," Harry offered noncommittally when he realised they were in a visual stalemate. "And payback was the furthest thing from your mind when you orchestrated those events, eh?"

Ginny reached up and patted Harry's shoulder in a distinctly condescending manner. "There, there, Harry," she said with a smile, "it'll all look better in the morning. You might even thank me for it later. Now, I've got exercises to do!"

Before he could fire a retort, she fled toward the Fat Lady and the Gryffindor common room. "Right. Tomorrow at five in the morning! Meet me at the training room!" Harry shouted after her. He could almost swear she smirked at him over her shoulder as she vanished behind the portrait.

Sighing, Harry headed to his own suite, ignoring the faint yells coming from the Fat Lady. He had his own exercises to do and essays to write before he could once again stare at Cyril's ever-annoying mirror.

A/N:

If you're a member of the JKR canon police, Harry's right arm was used in the end of Book IV for the rebirthing ritual. Feel free to have a conspiracy theory as to why I've changed that detail.

It's becoming devilishly hard for me to find time to write consistently. Given that it takes a minimum of one hour to "sink into the mode" to write on Echoes, I'm down to essentially what free time I can scrape up on weekends. Work is being rather irritating at the moment, but that should slack off somewhat around mid- to late-June. Until then, just stick with me, please.

I've had a few questions regarding whether I'll change anything in this story when Book Seven comes out. Assuming I even read the thing, then the short answer is "very unlikely" with the long answer much more complicated. I need nothing from canon at this point, as the fates of every character are known. All of the Horcruxes that are coming are my own creations, though I might change the object to match canon but not the effects of said object. Basically, any resemblance of this story to JKR's canon regarding the final book is purely coincidental, unless I note otherwise in the A/N of a specific chapter.

Thanks, as always, to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. Immeasurable thanks to cwarbeck and Chreechree for all their hard work. Thanks also to Reg and/or Lathac for Brit-picking, Treecat for slang checking, Sovran for a pre-publish sanity check, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

Author's Prefix Note to Chapter 25 at FF-net: PLEASE READ.

Two items consistently come up in reviews and Private Messages to me as the author of this story. This preface A/N is to address both of these tiresome issues, and act as a substantial warning to all readers not to propagate idiocy.

#1: "Don't make this a Harry/Ginny fic, I hate Ginny". First, I want you to sit down, and strictly from canon (ie, no fanficdom ridiculous characterizations), articulate why you don't like Ginny. Give me solid, sound reasons. If you can't think of any, don't ever say this to me, as I will publicly ridicule you in every chapter after this. Second, if and only if you can and do articulate reasonable discourse on the topic, I will be happy to discuss it with you.

#1-b: Can you wrap your mind around the fact that this story is an AU? Can you understand that almost none of the canon events that shaped the characters JKR created have transpired in this AU? Do you realize that all of these characters may have the same names as canon, but are not the same characters -- motivations, desires, fears, experiences -- as canon? If you cannot, do us both a favor -- stop reading, and go waste someone else's time.

#1-c: I love/hate character X, will X do (something canon-centric or random-event-centric) in this fic? See #1-b. The characters develop and have actions based on the AU premise, and I really don't care about canon when working on this particular story.

#2: "Hey, cool fic, I really dig the in-control Harry thing, you ought to post over at Dark Lord Potter or (some other random site), but maybe drop the H/G aspects..." First and foremost, the collection of prepubescent angsty males over at sites like DLP is simply pathetic. Most of the people there spend all their time playing games or reading comics (ooo, sorry, "manga" or "anime" or whatever you want to call it), and believe because of that, they know everything about martial arts, Japan, and life in general. In reality, they are incapable of reading anything and actually comprehending it, because they are so full of their own importance and ego, and therefore impaired mentally as far as I'm concerned. Do not advocate such crappy sites to me,



especially if you expect me to alter my story for the 'privilege' of posting there. I will not be kind to you.

With these points aside, if you have a brain and can use it, or you just enjoy the story, please continue to read. If you're offended or an idiot, go read something else. And most importantly, if you don't like what you're reading, don't read it. Is it really such a hard concept to understand?

## Chapter 25: Silent Accord

Ginny muttered incoherently as she dropped into the seat next to Harry at the Gryffindor table, her head immediately falling to the table with a soft thunk as her strawberry hair flowed across her folded arms.

“Being a bit dramatic there, aren't you?” Harry asked conversationally. He felt her kick to his shin, although he had to appreciate how weakly it was delivered. “Right, more leg work tomorrow, then, if you're still kicking today.” When she groaned faintly into her arms, Harry just chuckled. “You didn't learn the lesson yesterday, so you can try again for tomorrow.”

“Harry,” she moaned weakly, “don't you ever stop?”

Harry actually had to pause to consider the question. It was deliciously loaded in nature, yet she deserved an honest answer. “No. Especially not for my angel with the dented halo.”

“Great.” Her voice was still muffled as she was speaking into the table rather than to him. “Yesterday, you said skip the toast. What is it today?”

“Don't use the sugar.”

Ginny's groan of frustration was, if anything, more amusing than her posture. “Those prats – I need my tea. Just our sugar?”

“Nope, sorry. All the sugar as far as I can tell.” Harry paused to partially stand and look at the Head Table. Chuckling slightly, he dropped back into his seat. “Definitely all of it.”

While Ginny moved on to muttering commentary that was just too jumbled for Harry to decipher, he patiently assembled his own breakfast, opting for juice at the end since the sugar was clearly compromised and thereby eliminating his morning shot of caffeine. Ignoring her protests, Harry also extricated Ginny’s plate from under her head and tossed a few items he could recall seeing her eat before on it, leaving it by her elbow as she was still focused on her own misery rather than her empty stomach. She apparently decided the best way to show her gratitude was to pull the plate back to where it belonged, shifting her head in the process to lay on the table by Harry’s elbow. He was amused to see her eyes were still shut, her hair sprawled untidily, and her plate of food obviously uninteresting.

Reflecting on why all of the sugar had been tampered with, Harry finally came to the conclusion that Fred and George were setting up a multi-staged prank. The sugar would be tainted with a base, and at some point later in the day, they would introduce another agent or agents. Only contact with both or all agents would trigger the desired results. Grabbing a pot of tea and one mug, he carefully put just a small amount in the bottom of the cup and then swirled it vigorously to make it appear that he had drunk from the mug. Leaving it in front of his plate, he decided that he needed someone special to redirect the remaining agents on, but he had all morning to pick the perfect unwitting target. Then, of course, he also needed to identify the other compounds that would be headed his way.

“Dean’s just walked in,” Harry observed quietly, enjoying a pastry as Ginny’s fellow Gryffindor approached the table. It was shortly after seven in the morning. It was quiet and peaceful, as there was sparse student attendance and no staff. So far, no one in the room had attracted his attention as a worthy recipient of whatever mischief the twins had brewed for the day. The only anomaly that he could discern was a complete lack of any Slytherin students, as each of the other house tables already had a few students taking breakfast. The opposite end of the Gryffindor table had what appeared to be some

first-year students huddled around a book, which seemed to be typical – most of the students in the Hall were quite young in Harry's estimation.

"Harry, Ginny," Dean said cautiously as he dropped into a seat three places down the table from Ginny. "You're looking... ah, cosy this morning."

Harry paused to reflect on the situation. Ginny, mop of red hair and all, was probably in some artful pose of 'pity-me-please' as she sprawled over her arm and almost onto his. While her hair was certainly dishevelled and her clothes were not much better, he knew that she actually looked marginally better than he did. In his parting glance at the mirror on the way out of their training room, he had seen his hair wildly disarrayed, his clothes with a few small tears in them, and all of his exposed skin was looking very similar to that of someone afflicted with an unwanted sunburn. In contrast, her skin could be considered flushed when compared to her usual fair colouring. Or perhaps rather covered with rug-burn, if you had more experience with that kind of thing.

"It's been a refreshing morning, Dean," Harry offered with a carefully insinuating grin. "Ginny was demonstrating her impending mastery of the Scourgify Charm."

Dean's expression was a close approximation of flat disbelief, but that was fine by Harry. "Ginny, love, Dean seems to be dubious. Perhaps you'd care to demonstrate for him?"

Ginny peeked out from behind the mop of hair, looking briefly at Dean before facing Harry. "I quite like Dean, Harry. I don't want to hurt him just to satisfy your cruel sense of humour."

Dean seemed surprised at the word 'hurt', although the boy still had a look of healthy scepticism about him. That was exactly what Harry was after. "He's not convinced, Ginny. Tell me, Dean, do you think Scourgify could be used to disarm someone?"

Dean looked as though he was starting to have second thoughts, but he bravely shook his head. "Not really. You're not being serious, are you?"

Harry carefully put a challenging tone in his voice, along with a hint of suspicion that Dean was too afraid to find out one way or another. "Want a demonstration?"

It was clear that Dean felt he was stuck in a serious quandary. If he said no, it was safe to assume that he feared he would be making a poor impression on Harry and Ginny, regardless of Harry's real motivations. If he said yes, then he was volunteering to experience something that he had already been warned would hurt. Harry was happy to watch Dean try to find a resolution to the situation, his eyes darting between Harry and Ginny as he worked his way through the problem. "No offence, Harry, but only if Ginny does it."

Harry shot a smirk at Ginny before waving grandly for her to educate the great unwashed. Ginny shot a slight look of irritation at Harry before she faced Dean, her wand already in her hand. Harry was impressed that she had drawn the wand when he was distracted baiting Dean, and he had failed to notice her doing it. Unfortunately, that meant he was letting his guard slip a bit, and that in turn warned him that he really needed to be more cautious around everyone.

With a familiar fast swishing motion and an odd twist at the end, Ginny called out "Scourgify!" right as the tip aligned with Dean's exposed arm.

"Bloody hell!" Dean cried out, jumping back from the table in his haste to stop the sensations from the magic, but in his haste he forgot he had been sitting. In a tumble of limbs, he was on the ground, shaking his hand and still trying to back away from Ginny. She had stopped the spell almost as soon as she had cast it, leaving it in place for only a split second.

"See?" Harry whispered quietly to her. "With the tightened focus, the Scouring Charm delivers all of that energy into a very small spot. An

unsuspecting opponent will feel their nerves screaming even though there's no actual damage."

Dean had stopped trying to get away from them and was instead cradling his hand to his chest, his eyes wide open. "What the hell was that?!"

Ginny shot another look of mild irritation at Harry before she dropped her head back onto the table, all but silently demanding that Harry explain everything.

"The Scouring Charm, just like you heard, although she changed it slightly at the end. It didn't actually cause any damage, Dean, it just cleaned off the dirt from your hand. Felt rather uncomfortable, didn't it?" Harry chuckled slightly. "Sorry for baiting you, but now you know."

Dean gave Harry a dark glare before he moved off further down the table in a sulk, ultimately taking a new seat. The random glance of confusion he shot back at Ginny – in between disapproving frowns for Harry himself – was a perfect accompaniment to the breakfast that Harry was slowly working his way through. As more students and even staff trickled into the room, Harry saw more than a few people give him a glance, though the random half-smile on their faces left him somewhat puzzled.

Of passing interest to Harry was the fact that Sybill Trelawney was the first staff member to enter the room, closely followed by a small group of Slytherins. While he had been observing the Slytherin students ever since arriving at Hogwarts, the average member had become downright baffling after the change in Head of House. Rather than carrying on as though they were somehow a superior race to everyone else, they were now moving about with expressions of confusion, or, in a few cases, overt meekness. While he had a hard time accepting such a dramatic shift as a consequence of just removing one man's hand from a group of people, he had to admit it was a reassuring change of sorts, even if it was baffling.

"Oh, my dear," Professor Trelawney exclaimed as she registered Harry's presence. She stopped in her tracks and raised one hand

toward her throat, but paused half-way there, her very posture screaming melodrama. Considering her facial expression, Harry thought she might have suddenly been afflicted with severe constipation, but instead she moaned slightly and spoke in a numinous voice. "I foresee a troubling time for you, my child. You will receive a message of direst portents this morning ..." As her voice trailed off, her hand made a strange cupping motion in the air, almost as though she were plucking an object from space albeit with extreme reluctance.

When she turned to regard Harry with a sorrowful expression, he was hard pressed not to laugh derisively. "You've heard that Mrs Weasley is sending me a love note, then, Professor?"

The woman stood rigidly, not saying a thing for a long moment, before she turned and continued on her way to the Head Table. As she walked off, Harry nudged Ginny, who had sat up during the verbal exchange and was harbouring a faint smile. "So, Weasley," Harry hissed at her, "is there anyone you didn't tell about this letter from your mum?"

Ginny paused in cutting up her eggs to look at Harry with wide eyes. "I never told anyone, Harry." When he gave her a level stare, she just smiled impishly at him. "I may have been overheard by some of the portraits, though, when I read the letter to myself before sending it. I think the Fat Lady really doesn't like you very much."

With a sigh, Harry turned back to his breakfast. It was now inevitable that, no matter how he might deflect the efforts of the twins, the day would find some way to make a spectacle of him. As the Great Hall continued to fill slowly, Harry could not help but notice the constant glances from the students and even some of the staff. Those random half-smiles started to resemble smirks more than smiles, and he knew it was all thanks to the redhead at his elbow. No one was willing to come and sit at his end of the table, excepting Ginny and the long-since removed Dean, so he was left again with that fleeting sensation of sitting inside a fishbowl in the Great Hall, simply waiting for the proverbial hammer to fall.

Shortly before the owl post was due to ingress at half-past the hour, Neville, Hermione, and the remaining Weasleys arrived. While there was little to be directly thankful for, Harry had to admit he was happy that no portraits could visit the Great Hall, which was almost filled to bursting, so whatever was coming could only be relayed second-hand to those that had helped perpetuate the spectacle.

“Harry, m’boy,” Fred said with a grand gesture as he clapped Harry on the shoulder. “Smashing good to see you this morning.”

“And you look absolutely smashed, really,” George observed, leaning over the table to regard both Harry and Ginny with one baleful eye. “Anything we ought to know about, mmm?”

Harry regarded the two levelly before he jerked his thumb at their sister. “Want her to demonstrate her latest hex?”

Both boys leaned back sharply, dropping into their seats with a grin. “Now, now, Harry, let’s not be hasty,” George said with both hands up in the air.

“Quite!” Fred agreed. “Let’s just all enjoy some tea and wait for the post, right?”

Harry saw Ginny twitch slightly out of the corner of his eye, but he refused to change his expression at all. “No thanks,” he said simply. “I’ve already had my tea. You lot go right ahead.”

As Fred and George traded glances, Hermione leaned over to catch Harry’s attention. “Did you teach Ginny a new spell?” she asked quickly.

Harry groaned internally. He knew that this was one witch that would not rest if there were any chance she might learn something new. “No,” Harry replied cautiously, trying to avoid stepping into a hole with Hermione blithely chasing him to the bottom. “This morning we were just discussing the, uh, practical uses of Scouring Charms.”

“What do you mean, practical uses? It cleans things.” Hermione frowned with a vaguely pretty expression, her brows drawn close and her lips pouting. Harry could tell it was having an impact on Ron, who was sitting next to her, but he was just hoping for a distraction before she could realise that he was stonewalling.

As if falling from the heavens in answer to his silent wishes, a great fluttering of wings and birds announced the morning post. Everyone was firmly derailed from what they had just been discussing, and Harry suddenly found a large number of eyes watching him as the incoming flock of birds dispersed through the space under the arched ceiling.

Harry’s end of Gryffindor table was too busy watching the incoming owls to notice Ginny’s sudden smirk. “Are you ready, Harry?” Thankfully, she was whispering, or else he was sure that the twins would be participating in the discussion and not watching the ceiling so jubilantly.

“Oh, please,” Harry muttered back. “What’s the worst that your mum could do? A singing valentine?”

Ginny flashed him a smile he was sure he had seen before, possibly on Sirius right after he had just received divine insight into some hideous new pranking opportunity. “Would that make you uncomfortable, then?”

“Hardly.” Harry knew he had to carefully back-pedal from this position, or he was certain that somehow someone or some ones would be sending him that very thing, undoubtedly in amusing yet highly embarrassing ways. Perhaps even for the rest of the year. “Trust me, nothing you can come up with could be more mortifying than whatever Tonks has already done to me.”

“Challenge accepted, Harry.” Her triumphant smile left him ready to immediately track down Tonks and place a permanent Silencing Charm on her, accompanied perhaps with a permanent Gibberish Writing Hex.



Before he could say anything back in turn, though, Fred loudly announced, "We have a winner!"

Harry glanced up to see a regal owl angling for his seat, a small box firmly attached to the light grey bird. Harry grunted sourly, glancing around at the Great Hall. It was not quite crystal clear, but he thought that everyone in the hall looked as though Christmas had come early. From his quick glance, the Head Table was nearly uniform in regarding him with varying looks from the typical vague pervasive happiness on Hagrid to the cultivated mystic fugue on Trelawney. McGonagall, however, had the perfect countenance – a dash of disapproval, a hint of a smirk, and a good part of calm anticipation. Given how the woman had introduced him to Ginny's father, he was almost certain she expected Harry to be solidly put in his place momentarily.

The surrounding Gryffindors had, for the most part, given up on even pretending to eat breakfast, instead watching the large owl streak majestically to its target. A solid half or more of the remaining students were likewise abandoning all pretences, instead opting to watch the show surely about to descend from the ceiling. Hints of Mrs Weasley's infamous and generally feared temper were suddenly running again through the back of his mind, though he did his best to ignore them.

"Speechless already, Harry?" George asked as Harry ignored the bird that landed directly behind his breakfast plate, one leg firmly held out with a small box attached, both wings fully extended. The bird carried an air of suffering tolerance for the pitiful earth-bound misfits it was sentenced to serve. "Giving up so quickly?"

Harry was sure he would regret his agreement to Ginny's spurious challenge regarding this communication from her mother. At the same time, he knew that the secret of his meeting with her father, and her father's encouragement – nay, demand – to keep the game going, might unravel if he did not handle this perfectly.

Keeping his silence, Harry reached out and rapidly untied the box from the owl, which promptly took flight and streaked out of the hall, clearly favouring the freedom of the skies to meagre offerings of

bacon. Most post owls that were rented tended to rush to and fro, although Harry had to admit that Mrs Weasley had excellent taste if she had picked out that owl to deliver this first exchange in what he was sure to be an all-new type of battle.

With a sigh, he opened the box, and Harry had to pause to admire the contents. He kept the lid partially closed so that no one else could see inside and held it firmly there as he glanced around. The Weasley clan surrounding him was almost drooling in anticipation, although Ron was hiding it the best. Harry thought that Ron actually looked smug on some level, but he knew this was not a moment to draw things out. He was certain the twins, if no one else, would attack the parcel should he leave it alone much longer.

Flipping the lid fully open and then tilting the box and showing it among the various redheads, he saw them all appreciate the beauty inside. Sitting back with the box now firmly in front of him, he knew that the creator of the object inside was capable of magic that was nothing short of amazing when the proper motivation came along.

The perfectly formed crystal ball was filled with some kind of white reflective mist, which sparkled in the light. There were two distinct bands of power contained in it that he could see, the magic swirling in a very slow vortex inside, an aura of many, many enchantments radiating slowly outward. Tendrils of magic reached vaguely in all directions, but most seemed to be slowly angling upward and tapering off into the infinitesimal.

Resigned to his fate, Harry slowly reached out his hand to pick up the ball and to find out what the incredibly well-crafted object would do. He had agreed not to fight this, so the repercussions could be quite... difficult should Mrs Weasley be of a certain frame of mind.

Just before he grasped the ball, he heard Hermione ask an odd question.

“Ron, isn’t that Errol coming in just now?”

As his hand closed on the crystal orb and he flicked his eyes in silent query at Hermione, Harry’s world collapsed in a piercing pain that left

him feeling that his body had been plunged face-first into a raging inferno. He was only dimly aware of the scream that was filling his ears, unsure of where it originated from, only comprehending the unfathomable pain which felt like the Cruciatus Curse yet was somehow far worse.

His vision swelled and filled with the white material he had previously seen inside the crystal globe, now all-consuming, now everything, and the brightness of the radiant energy left his eyes watering, the world dissolving into a blinding uniformity of metallicly glittering, pristine white snow.

Drawing a deep breath, Harry was suddenly vaguely conscious that the pain was ebbing, and his throat was flashing signals to his brain indicating hurt and discomfort. A severe jolt in his side caused the whiteness to flicker into the dark of night before the world returned to depthless, boundless, eternal white. A bitter taste was slowly permeating his tongue, a flash of red wine vinegar made from something one step removed from rancid blood and sour grapes as a base.

“Harry Potter.”

The voice was calm and polite, surprisingly cultured, with only a hint of an accent, as though the speaker were from the highest levels of society and affluence.

Harry looked around to find a tall man, who had not been there moments before, standing mere feet from his right side, a man of faintly familiar stature. Harry felt that he should recognise the man, but he was having a hard time thinking after the excruciating waves of pain that had felt like interminable agony.

The man next to him was tall, and in some ways, reminded Harry of Sirius. His dark, shoulder-length hair, refined attire, and obvious good looks were in distinct contrast to anything he could directly remember Sirius wearing, however. If Sirius were to dress and speak in a manner befitting his status as the Head of House Black, Harry thought he might appear as this stranger did.

“You do not recognise me, perhaps?”

The voice was faintly amused, although there was no patronising tone or condescension that Harry could detect.

“You seem familiar, but, no, I can’t quite place you.”

The man nodded his head and solemnly held up both hands. “You should know, Harry Potter, that within this place, neither of us may physically harm the other. Have no fear of me.”

“Right,” Harry shot back with tangible antipathy, reminded of his brutal entrance. “That’s why when I touched that ball I enjoyed pain more intense than the Cruciatus?”

The man paused, regarding Harry intently, a hint of surprise on his features. “Oh?” He stroked his chin idly, and Harry had the impression that he was at a loss for words as the silence stretched out. “I am most sorry for that, Harry. I did not design this such that it would cause you sensations of pain at all. That was not my intent.”

Harry nodded his head slowly, understanding that something had gone wrong with the intended purpose, but not particularly pleased with this mistake. “Unplanned consequences seem to be the story of my life. With whom am I speaking, then?”

“Indeed,” the man replied. “You have no idea how true that is.” He said nothing for another long moment, merely holding Harry’s gaze calmly. “Harry, I am the man once known as Tom Riddle.”

Harry’s brain stopped functioning for a flickering heartbeat as the words registered dimly in the back of his brain, and he rapidly evaluated his situation almost on complete auto-pilot. No wand, no sword, no immediate weapon other than his body. Without even fully being aware of it, Harry released the constraints on his core and felt the discharge that signalled the rolling wave area Stunner that he had laboriously learned how to consciously perform. While he clearly felt the drain that the wandless magic required, nothing happened in the

white void – no ring rolled out from his body, no blast hit a shield upon Riddle, nothing.

Unconscious of his hard training reflexes involuntarily following the magical failure, Harry stepped slightly to one side, and his foot lashed out, smashing straight through the space that Riddle's jaw occupied. Meeting no resistance and having been delivered in full power with an extended snap for higher impact force, Harry spun around with the lack of resistance to the kick. Harry came back to a standing position, partially crouched, hands outstretched slightly in preparation to ward off any attack. He felt a twinge of irritation from his body due to the rapid attack that had met no resistance.

Tom Riddle seemed, if anything, mildly amused. "Did I not mention that we cannot physically harm each other in this place, Harry? I spent a considerable amount of time working on this, so I do hope that you appreciate it. You might say that it's similar to an interactive Pensieve, although it doesn't require the pedestrian effort of climbing into one."

"Consider me charmed," Harry said tightly, barely controlling his seething fury. "Why do this?"

Riddle paused once again to rub a hand absently at his chin, the posture affected similar to that of The Thinker regardless of intent, his jet-black hair cascading almost artfully across the high forehead. Riddle was either fond of dramatic pauses, or else he was genuinely puzzled about how to proceed. "That's the difficult question, Harry. I ask your forbearance to hear me out, if you would, as I try to answer it."

Harry slowly backed away to increase the distance between them, as he had no reason to take Riddle's word that neither could harm the other. While it did, in fact, appear that Harry could not harm Riddle, the opposite had yet to be proven. Considering the excruciating pain he had experienced as he transitioned into the encompassing white prison, coupled to his past history with this opponent, he was less than inclined to take anything at face value.

“I appear to have little choice,” Harry snapped when he felt sufficient distance between them to provide him temporary peace of mind. “I obviously don’t know how to leave here.”

Riddle made a grand gesture, waving his arm in a sweeping arc to describe the glittering void. “Yes, rather interesting, isn’t it? We cannot be interrupted here, and as soon as we have finished talking, you have my word that I shall release you. For you see, I cannot leave, either, until I release the right controls. So, in a sense, we are both prisoners here together. We’ll exit at the same time.”

“Right, and why the bloody hell should I trust you?”

Riddle shook his head slowly, an expression of sorrow slowly creeping across the man’s features. “Truthfully, you have no reason to, Harry. And I do not fault you for this. In fact, it’s one of the reasons why I devised this place, so that we might talk, and you would not feel threatened.”

“Yeah, this is really non-threatening, Tom.”

Harry watched impassively, keeping his face a blank mask, choking down his own rage as Riddle frowned slightly. Taking a brief chance, Harry carefully extended his Legilimency skills toward where he thought Riddle was in space, but he found nothing. No shields, no consciousness, just a blanket void. Either the man had Occlumency shields as strong as Harry’s, or else they really were truly incorporeal here, unable to harm each other.

“Harry, all I ask is that you hear me out. You realise we are, perhaps, somewhat at odds outside of this place, yet if we can have no dialogue, how will we resolve our conflicts?” Riddle’s tone was soothing, his rich and deep voice a sharp contrast to what Harry recalled from events over the summer, or that hateful blistering winter day years past. In many respects, the man before him sounded like a mixture between Nicolas and Dumbledore, and Harry could feel how insidiously charismatic it might be to an unwary person.

“That’s easy, just roll over and die for me. Then there won’t be a conflict.”

“ Harry, Harry,” Riddle said quietly, “you know that’s all but impossible. I have gone further down the path to immortality than anyone, and I can neither just die nor simply be killed by you or anyone else.”

“That’s funny,” Harry spat with some venom, “I’ve been wanting to put that little theory of yours to the test for a while now.”

With a sigh, Riddle began pacing slowly, never coming closer to Harry than he already was. “Really, Harry, must we trade barbs in this way? Can we not talk like the intelligent and civilised people we are?”

“Civilised? You? By whose definition?!”

Riddle paused to shake his head in a dramatic manner. There was a mournful expression on his face, and his eyes were shining brightly, leaving Harry with the impression that the man was almost ready to cry, as unfathomable as such an act might be. “I believe I deserve that, Harry, but that’s why I want to talk to you. You see, I was wrong. I have wronged you and many others greatly, I have lost sight of what I set out to do, I have done unspeakable acts, and I was wrong to do what I did.”

Harry involuntarily took two steps backward, blinking furiously for an eternal heartbeat. “What?”

“Yes, yes, now you begin to see why we are in this place. I was wrong, Harry.”

Harry stood there, completely shocked and floored, his mind churning furiously to try to understand what he had just been told. Voldemort confessing to being wrong, to having been evil incarnate? Surely this was some prank of the first order, perhaps the payback of Mrs Weasley as she demonstrated her completely diabolical genius to teach him a sharp lesson, a genius that would make the twins babes in the wood by comparison. A genius that the Marauders themselves

would be foolhardy to challenge, housed in a person that was vindictive on a truly frightening level. Harry vowed then and there that if this was a prank by the matriarch of that family, he would see to it she would never have a peaceful night again in her life.

“Go on, then, pull the other one.”

Shaking his head, Tom Riddle looked at Harry with open sorrow on his handsome features. “No, Harry, there is no ‘other one.’ I was wrong, I have done evil, and I am here to ask you to help me fix this mess I have made.”

“Why me?”

“Harry,” Riddle said with a gentle voice, “you know it has to be you. And I feel that of everyone out there, perhaps I have wronged you most of all. I denied you the parents and family you should have had, and I have been informed of what your Muggle... relatives did. I am deeply sorry to know you suffered through that, let alone how I caused it to come about.”

Harry could feel his rage building, his wrath shaking his own body with the hatred that was slowly boiling up inside of him beyond measure. Here stood Riddle, calmly admitting to the murder of his parents, admitting his knowledge of Harry’s initial childhood, and sweeping it all away with a mere ‘I was wrong’ speech. Harry’s own voice was a hiss of hate as he faced the man directly responsible for so much hell in Harry’s world. “You think you can fix this? You can just say, ‘Oh, so sorry! Let’s be friends!’ and then it’s all over? If I could work magic here, you’d know better than that!”

Riddle only held his hands up in supplication, a lone tear drifting from the corner of his right eye. “No, Harry, I cannot fix this, you are correct. But I can atone for my acts, can I not? I can turn myself in and go quietly to Azkaban, yes?”

Harry knew his anger was reaching epic proportions, and he knew his emotional state was going through too many upheavals to keep the even keel he needed for control over his magic. If he failed to calm



down quickly, he was going to have a serious accidental magic discharge, and he knew just how bad that could be.

“You want to turn yourself in? You don’t need me for that! Just pop down to the Ministry and do it!”

“Harry, Harry,” Riddle said with ringing compassion, a second tear edging after the path of the first, “it’s not that easy, and you of all people know that most keenly.”

Harry could not stand to hear this man, this monster, talking to him so calmly, compassionately, patiently, so kindly. At the same instant his vision turned red with unchecked resentment, he felt his magical core drain again substantially from an accidental discharge, and he let out a short grunt of undiluted hate and turned resolutely away from Tom Riddle. Staring into the white void was not in the least calming or reassuring, but not having to look at that thing he was being forced to talk to would surely help him find some semblance of balance again, and damn the consequences of turning his back on an enemy. His own harsh breathing was only faintly registering in his ears. Searching for any peaceful thoughts, Harry desperately clung to his memories of flying, of the thrill of the dive, the beauty of the earth from the sky, the feel of the wind about his body. Continuing to focus solely on the concept of flight, Harry began the deep breathing meditative exercises, seeking and hoping to find his centre again.

After an interminable amount of time, Harry slowly turned back to face Riddle. The dark-haired man was looking at Harry with eyes that seemed to leak misery, bright and vivid, and it was all Harry could do not to wish fervently that he could just kill the man then and there since inflicting agony was already denied in this place.

“Explain it to me, then.” Harry’s voice was cold, the control exacting, his internal sense of self thoroughly buttressed and bunkered deep inside. He knew he had to keep a tight leash on his thoughts and emotions, or he might inadvertently drain himself into unconsciousness through accidental magic releases. That could be deadly, given the opponent standing before him.

“I only wanted immortality, Harry,” Riddle said with a small shrug. “I didn’t want to die, to lose everything so callously. That’s what I set out for, my quest if you will, as even Riothamus Arthur once set upon his quest for the Cauldron of Annwfn.”

Riddle’s voice, while still laced with sorrow and even a hint or two of fatigue, carried an undertone of vision and belief that such a quest was normal, attainable even. “Oh, I didn’t think Muggle-borns had the right or the understanding to attend such a place as Hogwarts. Let them attend other schools, if they so chose. Between those two beliefs of mine, for immortality and for separating those who could never truly understand or appreciate magic as those born and raised with it could, well, I found many people who agreed with me while I was at Hogwarts.”

Riddle shook his head briefly and held Harry’s gaze with far more calm than Harry could feel for the situation. To Harry, either the man was a consummate actor of the first order, or else he was sincere in his statements. Neither made the least bit of logic, given everything Harry knew or understood prior to falling through the looking glass.

“Later, Harry, after I left Hogwarts, I found that even more people shared the same ideals.” Riddle started pacing slowly again, still keeping the distance between them that Harry had previously established. “We began meeting regularly. I left the planning of how to separate the Muggles and Muggle-born to my friends, while I delved into the quest for never-ending life. You would be amazed at all of the people throughout history who have also sought to stave off the eternal sleep, Harry. I know I was.”

For a fleeting moment, Harry had a vision of Hermione, pressing him for details about magic, flicking her wand with the wrong words, and her absolute quest for knowledge and facts. Before he could consider the unexpected thought fully, Riddle stopped pacing and faced Harry again with a sigh. “I found many rituals that would each give me a part of what I needed, Harry, to transform myself and live forever. It pains me now to say it, but I tried almost all of them. Somewhere along the way, I fear that those rituals changed me and led me down the path that I followed before.” With a shudder, Riddle seemed to

almost hunch in upon himself. "I cannot begin to describe some of the things we have seen and done, and my friends... my friends have become as evil as I, if not more so. Look at me! This is how I once was, and you saw what my body became after the rebirth! How far have I fallen that I now slink upon the ground in my Darkness?"

Harry decided he was, quite simply, baffled. He could find no reason for Riddle to be making such things up, yet he could find no reason to believe the man, either. It was almost as though he would next claim to be able to bring Harry's biological parents back to life or to give Sirius back the long years he lost to the wretched Azkaban Dementors. "What has any of this to do with me?" Harry's own voice was barely at normal volume, yet it was tremulous, an unwilling testament to the distressed mental state he was in.

"Everything, Harry, everything." Riddle half-reached out toward Harry, as though to step forward and clasp a brotherly hand upon his shoulder, but apparently caught himself before he could do anything more than reach partially. "Ever since my rebirth this summer, I have been plagued by these thoughts. I ordered everyone to leave you alone, to leave everyone alone, while I considered these things." Riddle held up a hand emphatically before Harry could say anything. "Yes, yes, I was angry, very, very angry when I was reborn. I had suffered for years in that wraith-like state; my so-called friends had left me, abandoned me, and they foreswore the vows that they had made to me. I was just as angry when we first met some years ago, and, in my hate and anger at you for putting me in that situation, I again took someone precious from you. I was wrong, Harry, I was wrong. Would you not be angry in those situations? Would you not rage if everyone left you for dead, yet knowing that you were still alive somewhere? If you were sorely wounded and unable to get help on your own?"

The last thing Harry wanted to do was follow such a leading train of thought, for if he started agreeing with his foe on this topic, surely he would find himself agreeing on others. Any concurrence with Riddle was all but a death writ as far as Harry was concerned.

“I see you agree with me,” Riddle observed quietly. “Yes, I also once again assaulted you this past summer, quite unjustly, and I am deeply sorry for that now, Harry. And I weep for the loss of life that happened that night. But why did I tell my friends to leave you and others alone? In the days immediately after my rebirth, I had to reconsider what it was that made others fight for you, rather than fight because of you. And I did not like my conclusions, for they told me how wrong I had become in these things.”

“Your request really stopped the Malfoys from having a go, didn’t it?”

“No, and I was most displeased with Lucius and his son, Harry. I’ve had some words with them over the matter.” With an almost negligent flick of a finger, Riddle conjured two comfortable appearing chairs, motioning Harry into one as he slowly sank into the other. They were no closer to each other than they had been all along, but somehow the situation was becoming familiar, intimate, almost comfortable, and that was almost more unnerving to Harry than everything else going on.

“Recently I have found myself reflecting on the things I have done during my own darkness, and I worry for the problems I have created. I dug up my own journals, Harry, and began trying to reconstruct what I did and what I was thinking. I am very sorry to say that some of the objects I created, some of the evil I brought forth, they have disappeared during my slumber.”

Harry said nothing and let the numbness of the moment supplant all other concepts in his mind. He knew of what Riddle was speaking, yet he was unable to care even slightly at this point for the idea.

“I see you do not appear to know of this. On the one hand, Harry, that is quite good – you have been most fortunate to never find such filth. On the other hand, it means I must spend more time finding out what happened, for I cannot simply let others accidentally run across these.”

“Riiight,” Harry finally said with some of his usual sarcasm coming back, although it merely came across as weary resignation even to his own ears. “You plan to clean up your little mistakes, is that it?”

“In a sense, yes. Harry, I am very close to true immortality. There is but one rite left for me to do, and it shall all be over. I am here before you to let you know that I understand, now, what has gone so very wrong, and that I will be trying to make amends as I may. Well, I will as soon as I have completed this ritual. If you would help me, then perhaps all of this can be completed so much faster. Together, I hope we might find a way to capture my friends that have gone to such lengths, such unspeakable acts against others. We two might locate and destroy those mistakes I made, and I will work with you to see this all ended.”

Harry could tell he narrowed his eyes, even if it was subconsciously, as he tried to understand what he was being told in full. “You said you wanted my help to do these things? Why not Dumbledore? Or the Aurors?”

Sighing, Riddle nodded his head slowly. “Think about it, Harry. Before I might turn myself over to the Aurors, these things simply must be done. It will begin the atonement for my sins, to try to do better. And you know that only you and I have the power to do these things within us.”

“And you want my help to do what precisely?”

Riddle smiled, but it was a smile full of sorrow and pain, the like of which Harry had only seen from his father after the fall events of 1989. It was unnerving in the extreme to see such upon Riddle, and Harry could almost feel the hairs on the nape of his neck rising as though hackles were extant there. “I don’t mind discussing it with you, Harry. But I do not expect you to be persuaded in just one discussion. I think that perhaps we have talked enough for now, and we should talk again later, after you’ve had time to reflect on this.”

In all, Harry thought the entire conversation was about as expected as sitting down to tea and biscuits with Fudge, only to be handed the

job of Minister during the conversation. The way Tom Riddle was behaving so far exceeded all known or expected or theorized ideas that Harry was simply forced to admit his preconceived ideas around the persona non grata of Lord Voldemort were woefully inadequate for handling the reality of Tom Riddle, the man. "Why should anyone trust you, let alone me of all people?" Harry hated that his voice had become almost conversational, the comfort of hate replaced with numbness and reflexive manners.

"When the time comes, Harry," Riddle said with a half smile, sorrow still plain on his features, "I'll give you an Unbreakable Oath."

"That's it? You've reformed, you'll do one final ritual, you'll help clean up the mess you've made, and then you'll shuffle off to Azkaban to pay your dues?" Harry knew that under other conditions, his sarcasm would have been in top form for such a retort, but all he could manage now was a vague inquisitiveness. Somehow, he felt, there was nothing new to be learned here.

"Mostly, Harry. I will need your time, your willingness to come and work with me, to directly help me. It's a lot to ask for, is it not? I'll not expect to hear an answer from you right away, Harry. I know you'll need to think about it and talk to others about it. Do you have any other questions for me right now? That cannot or should not wait until next time?"

Numbly, Harry just slowly shook his head.

"Very well, Harry. I'll be in touch. I, too, must wait for the right time, as this last ritual can only be completed when the celestial bodies are aligned correctly." Riddle stood, and Harry unwittingly mimicked his action. The chairs vanished, and Riddle looked around once more. "I'm sorry, Harry, but if it hurt coming in here, it's going to hurt leaving as well. The next time, I shall use a much simpler means of communication."

Harry nodded again, having already expected as much.

“Again, I apologize for taking so much from you, Harry. Your parents and your childhood with those people who were entrusted with your care... that should never have happened to you. You deserved otherwise. You deserved loving parents, a loving home, and the freedom to be happy and carefree and safe. We’ll talk again, Harry,” Riddle said quietly.

And then Harry’s world exploded into unremitting pain for a second time, as everything turned completely black, the white swirls replaced with a vortex as though a black hole was consuming the universe. He could feel his own magic flaring as his mind succumbed to the torrential sensations of crossing the barrier made up by Riddle’s magic.

It was the sound of shattering glass that made Harry jerk slightly as he slowly understood that he was free of the magic binding him into the globe. An overpowering foul taste was still on his tongue, one of vinegar made from a hideous base. He could hear indecipherable noises around him, and his body was giving him conflicted sensations. Voices were coming and going, several voices, tantalisingly just on the edge of sanity. They were quiet, but there were moments when he could understand fragments of the words.

“... stopped the seizures, quickly, get me ...”

He felt as though he had been in the sun too long. His skin was hot and itchy. He was unable to move, his body stuck firmly to the surface he was laying on top of.

“... need some help for this ...”

His stomach was churning, threatening to upend its contents everywhere, except his throat felt unbelievably raw and he knew it would be a new kind of agony if he did lose control.

“... we don’t have enough potion for ...”

His head ached, spikes of pain shooting through his forehead with each beat of his heart, sounds ringing in his ears, a cacophony of

pleasure and pain to his brain – glass jars hitting a hard surface, fabric rustling, feet moving rapidly, all echoes of the darkness in his mind blending together. His magic felt weak and drained, as though his mentors had put him through a full day's brutal training and then kept him in the house with David.

The sound of rustling fabric became louder and then disappeared. "Finite Incantatem!" resounded loudly in his head, reverberating with agony. Suddenly he felt a cold hand pressed to his forehead. Involuntarily, he groaned at the freezing contact, and his eyes shot open. The room was dark, with a weak light trailing in through a fragmented and bizarrely shaped doorway, outlining the person next to him. The ceiling above him was shadowy, the walls and furnishings all dark in colour, and everything had a strange visual texture. There was an odd smell to the air, and the room was too warm.

"Lumos!" Light flooded his senses in a tight, narrow beam as a wand swept slowly over the bed. "Mr Potter," the soft female voice whispered, "do you know me?"

Her face was familiar, but it was painful to recall the details. His brain felt as though someone had stuck a white-hot iron into the deepest, darkest recesses and stirred vigorously. It was her dark hair pulled back in a bun and her stern expression that reminded him of what he once knew. "Healer Worthy," he rasped out, choking on the dry yet painful sensation from his throat.

"Yes, Mr Potter," she said as her face melted into a gentle smile. "I know you're in considerable pain. I hadn't expected you would need my services quite so quickly." She turned slowly to look around while sweeping her wand about, and Harry saw her eyes come to focus on the floor near the bed. She carefully moved around the bed to the other side, before meeting his eyes again. "Rest, now, while I check you over."

Harry let his eyes drift over the strange texture of the walls so very near him in the room, trying to understand where he was, or why the setting was so different from a medical facility. When Healer Worthy's glowing wand light brushed over the one of the walls adjacent to his



bed for the third time, a bit of the odd material fell down, exposing an expanse of a smooth block wall that was quite dark, and then he suddenly understood. He was in the Hogwarts infirmary, in a private room like the headmaster.

The shapes nearest him about the room were the charred remains of furniture, the walls and ceiling blackened from fire, his skin burned from his own magic and the damage he had wrought upon the room. Where curtains and blankets had once rested were piles of ash and bent frames, the single door from his room to the main infirmary covered in grime and soot and hanging wildly askew, letting only bits of light into the room. He could discern the whiter colours of the main infirmary farther away through the opening, away from the zone of destruction that he was housed in. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the region just beyond his fractured door was also rather dark grey in appearance.

Healer Worthy's hand running over his chest and legs made Harry focus his attention back to her. Her wand was held firmly in her right hand, slowly drawing the tip across his body as her left hand matched the focal point, always working in the pool of light. Harry had a vague recollection of Cyril objecting to this woman's hands-on approach to healing, but he was too confused to care at the moment.

"All right, Mr Potter," she said briskly, putting her left hand back on his forehead. "Aside from the burns, you've got a raw throat from your screaming and some smoke inhalation, combined with what registers as an incredible headache. I can fix all of those, although the burns and throat will take until tomorrow to fully heal. Try not to move. I'll be right back."

As her footsteps marched around the broken door and down the aisle, out of sight into the main infirmary, he let his eyes trail over the room once more, paying closer attention to details. Most of the objects in the room were destroyed, vials and puddles all over the floor. A table was a mangled and charred lump near the head of his bed. From what he could see through the doorway, the rest of the Infirmary appeared to be unscathed, barring the immediate vicinity of the door to his chamber. Harry realised that small fact would translate to the

safety of where Madam Pomfrey had her office and most likely her further stock of medical supplies.

As he was trying to work out exactly why the infirmary was deathly quiet and glowed faintly to his vision, Healer Worthy came striding back, briskly setting several potions on the edge of his bed. "Headache first, your throat second, some pain numbing on the burns, and then we'll talk, right?"

Harry had no intention of talking or moving, but she seemed to understand regardless. She poured out a measure of potion, holding a goblet to his lips and slowly trickling the contents into his mouth. While it tasted hideous, it was almost sweet in comparison to the bitter aftertaste of Riddle's charmed world. By the time he finished the potion, he could feel his headache fading somewhat, and he knew it would be almost completely gone within minutes.

She gave him a large glass of water to chase the first potion down with before she administered a second that immediately eased the pain of his throat. Harry had been unaware just how uncomfortable merely breathing had been, but with the pain removed, he found himself happy to be free of the discomfort in his throat. After a second measure of water, she set everything back on the bed before focusing closely on Harry's face. With a short nod, she cast a long series of charms across his exposed skin, substantially easing all of the pain, although it did not dissipate fully.

"Now, Mr Potter, can you tell me what happened?"

Harry paused to consider the question. "Can I? Not really. I, uh, experienced something odd, but I was unaware of my surroundings here. So at best I could tell you about that. Will I? No, I'm sorry."

"Mr Potter, please, whatever happened to you affected a great many other people. We need to know what happened to help them as well."

"What do you mean? Who was affected?"

The Healer stood over him, clearly judging whether or not to answer his question. Finally, she sighed softly before looking quickly toward the silent infirmary and back to Harry. "Almost a quarter of the people in the Great Hall during breakfast were Stunned, Mr Potter, and that included most of the staff. One student was injured somehow before then, when she tried to separate you from that orb that you were holding. The magical backlash caused quite a problem with a Miss Weasley, I believe her name was."

Harry said nothing, trying to understand what had possessed Ginny to even try such a stunt, let alone when it might have happened. "That was before everyone was Stunned, or after?"

"Before, as I understand it," Worthy told him. "Near the very beginning."

Harry nodded his head slowly, stopping rather quickly as his skin protested the movement by reminding him of his burns. The brief moment when the eternal whiteness flickered to blackness would have been Ginny's doing. "I see. What else?"

"I trust you've noticed the damage here?" Harry merely grunted at the question. The Healer shifted her gaze about, almost randomly locking onto different locations in the room. "To make matters worse, none of our medical potions seem to be working properly today except for the ones administered to you and Miss Weasley. There were some additional injuries to a few other students – siblings of Miss Weasley, mostly – when they were with her here and you had another... incident."

"Why do I have the feeling you're avoiding something?"

She finally turned to look back at Harry, and he could tell she was unhappy. "There's no evidence that it was linked, Mr Potter, so it's only speculation. But Professor Dumbledore began having seizures during your episode. As near as we can tell, it began when you picked up that crystal orb and ended just before I found you free of the thing."

Harry said nothing, but his mind began to slowly come back together, pieces falling into place. As he considered the implications of her statements, he slowly asked, "Where's Cyril?"

"Out there," she waved vaguely at the doors, "keeping the Aurors summoned by the Defence Professor from arresting you."

Harry knew his face had to show his surprise. Having Aurors materialise in order to arrest him because he was under attack from a third party was about as logical as arresting an unwitting spectator to a fight for getting hit. "How long have I been in here?"

Healer Worthy shrugged in a faintly distracting manner. "I'm not sure. I know you've been here at least," she said as she glanced at her watch, "thirty-seven minutes, as that's when I was called in, along with one or two others. I've no idea how long you were here before then. Madam Pomfrey is one of the injured, Mr Potter."

Harry was unable to stop the bitter sigh from escaping. "How badly hurt is she?"

"She should be fine, Mr Potter. What happened was simply unexpected, so she was not prepared for it."

"And what did happen?"

Healer Worthy swept her arm in a gesture encompassing the room and the obvious damage contained therein. "That's a good question. You seemed to be in the throes of a violent fit, and your magic lashed out several times. After the first time, we isolated you. The last time nearly blew this room apart. It took quite a bit of work to keep you relatively unscathed, considering what happened."

"Sorry," Harry grunted, feeling only vaguely empathic to the damage he had wrought unintentionally. He needed to get out of the infirmary. He needed to find Remus, Edgar, Cyril, or anyone that knew what he was doing on some level. He had to explain what really happened and not whatever people assumed happened. "My little... fit wasn't pleasant. I guess I had some accidental magic happen."

“That was accidental magic?” Healer Worthy had a look of consternation on her face. “I’ve known mature wizards and witches who couldn’t intentionally do half of what you did without trying, Mr Potter. You’re telling me that was accidental?”

“Yeah, I think most of it was. I need Cyril. Or else I need you to let me out of here. Right now would be a good time.” Harry’s mind was just now coming unstuck after the surprises and pain that he had endured. Even though the headache potion combined with the numbing charms were taking the edge off the haze of sensations from his own skin, he knew he was really in no condition to be running about openly, and yet, he had little choice in the matter. He needed to talk to others.

“Absolutely not!” Healer Worthy had all the scorn in her voice that Harry thought it was possible to imbue yet still enunciate words. “You’re in dire need of more healing, and the worst thing you could do right now is run around!”

“Then bring Cyril in here. I really need to talk to someone permitted to know what I do.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s not possible. You’ll have to wait for him to return. Are you sure you won’t tell me about what happened?”

Harry shook his head quickly, only to immediately regret the motion as it triggered painful flashes across his skin and lingering headache.

The Healer obviously caught his wince of pain, because she leaned forward again, measuring out the next potion. “This is going to dull all of your pain receptors, so be careful or you’ll hurt yourself and not even know it. Those charms don’t last very long.” As soon as he had the goblet drained, she was on him again with her wand, one hand drawing patterns, the other slowly sliding over his arms and legs. “It’s interesting that the worst of the burns are on your hands and face, Mr Potter. You’ve got some fire damage giving you light burns on anything that was exposed, but the other burns seem more magical in nature.” As her hands and wand worked, Harry felt strange

sensations even through the nerve-blocking potion. It was soothing in a way, even if he thought she might be tugging on his skin hard enough to really hurt even if he had not been injured.

After a long time at her work, Healer Worthy finally stopped and stepped back, giving Harry a faint smile. "That will keep you for several hours. I'll need to do that again before dinner, and then before bedtime, and you should be relatively normal tomorrow morning. You'll want to take it easy for another day or two, but you'll be fine. Now, can I trust you to stay here and rest, Mr Potter, or will I be dosing you with a Dreamless Sleeping Drought?"

Harry tried for a reassuring smile, although he was uncertain his face was capable of smiling at the moment. "You'll be able to see this mop of hair right here, ma'am."

"Very well. I'll be looking in on you from time to time. Do try to sleep. When I see your Mentor next, I'll send him along."

Harry nodded slowly to keep the agitation of his head and skin to a minimum. Satisfied, the Healer made her way out of the room, pausing only briefly as she passed the broken door to give Harry one last glance.

As soon as the Healer cleared the room and his line of sight, Harry laboriously climbed out of the bed, doing his best to ignore the pain that resounded through his nerves despite all the blockers in effect. He would be slow in movement, but he would hopefully be out and back quickly. Pulling out his left wand, which was always better for Transfiguration than his right wand, Harry used some of what little magic he had remaining to Transfigure the pillowcase into an approximation of his own head with an unruly chunk of hair sticking out of the top. It was much poorer quality than a store mannequin and would fail to fool anyone who looked at him from a distance of less than eight feet, but it would be enough to at least get him out the door. He was just too tired and too drained to do a proper job of it, but the poor lighting in the room might work to his advantage.

Pulling the blankets up to just under the nose, Harry thought he might have as much as thirty minutes, if he hurried, before the Healer would

do a closer check and locate his treachery. That would be more than sufficient time to either isolate Cyril or else locate the reprobates most likely still loitering in the Shrieking Shack. Harry then took the time to cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself, unable to stop an annoyed feeling at how long it took to cast and settle. His core was dangerously low if even his off-hand spell casting was hard pressed to pull off a charm he had been doing for years.

When the charm was fully settled, Harry made his way around the broken door and into the main infirmary. He paused immediately, as he noted the two beds smashed to pieces and left in heaps on either side of the broken door to his grim room. There was no evidence of fire damage, but there was plenty of evidence that a force like a Bludger on steroids had repeatedly smacked the two pieces of furniture into misshapen lumps. There were a few broken cabinets in the area, but the truly puzzling bit was the complete lack of furniture otherwise. All of the beds, all of the curtains – it was all gone, either relocated or simply Vanished. Immediately to his left, however, was the open door into the private room where the headmaster was kept. Harry could hear the faint murmuring of voices coming from within the room, but he was unwilling to linger for eavesdropping even if it might be profitable.

Harry listened closely at the closed doors to the infirmary, but he could hear nothing discernable. Hoping that no one was on the other side of the doors, Harry gently pushed them open and slipped into the corridor, keeping the door handle firmly gripped to ease it shut. As he turned away from silently closing the door, he found himself confronted with the missing furniture from the infirmary.

All of the beds lined one side of the corridor leading to the hospital wing, stretching all the way to the stairs as far as he could tell. Approximately fifteen of the beds were occupied, with the first one holding Madam Pomfrey, wrapped in bandages. Harry tried to look away as he realised the second bed held McGonagall, and she was likewise wrapped in thick bandages.

The third bed in the corridor made Harry pause. Her sprawled form was quite different from what he had seen just a few hours prior, as she lay pathetically on the breakfast table, hair tumbled carelessly

across both of their arms. Now, however, her hands were bandaged heavily, her long hair was trapped under her own back, and it was clear that she was having unpleasant dreams in some potion-induced haze of subconscious flights. Glancing around, Harry could see one Healer far down the corridor, stooped over someone. As gently as he could manage, Harry rolled her shoulders slightly with his right hand, which enabled him to slide her hair free of the unanticipated entrapment. As his left hand pulled it free and brushed across the nape of her neck, he was unable to help from feeling a flash of sorrow that Ginny was like this. She had tried to help him and wound up in this situation for her actions, with unknown injuries and complications. Exhaling slowly, Harry pushed her hair back away from her neck, so she would be able to turn in her sleep and not trap herself again. Already, her agitation was reduced, if not gone completely.

Harry paused almost immediately after he stepped away, seeing Neville on the next bed in the corridor. The boy's eyes were open, and he was looking approximately where Harry was standing. Harry said nothing, but he knew Neville was bright enough to understand the implications of what he had seen. Neville was also bandaged, but around the head and chest, not on the hands.

"You're all right, then?" came the quiet whisper.

"I will be."

Neville was obviously working something over in his own mind, his open face never once concealing a range of emotions and thoughts deep inside. Harry was content to wait him out, since he valued the unwavering companionship Neville offered so sincerely.

"Harry?"

"Yeah, Neville?"

"D'you know who did this?"

"Yeah, Neville."



Silence returned as Neville worked his way through some final thoughts.

“Land one for me, will you?”

Harry smiled inwardly, knowing in that moment that Neville was on his side and had made that choice freely, without even knowing the entire matter. It was clear that his was an acceptance borne truly, in an act of friendship, even if the motivation was retribution for the wounds inflicted on Neville’s other friends. For some reason, it was satisfying to be well considered by the boy, or rather the young man, who was watching a patch of air that Harry knew he would be unable to see into. Harry acknowledged to himself that he had just cemented his first real friend of his own age, and it was a soft-spoken, gentle soul, which he admitted was ironic on so many levels.

“You have my word, Neville. When I catch him, there’ll be one for you, one for Ginny, and lots of ones for others, too.”

“Good luck, Harry.”

“Thanks, Neville.”

Harry did his best to ignore the collection of redheads and other students as he walked down the corridor. He kept to the far right, leaving the widest berth possible between himself and the beds. This reduced the chance of him being heard, but it also allowed him to move past the Healer checking over the patients in the makeshift ward.

Looking down the staircase toward the Entrance Hall, Harry could see Cyril surrounded by a knot of easily identifiable Aurors. While under other circumstances, Harry might have enjoyed sneaking around such an ego-infested group, but in his current state he knew it was far too risky. Instead, he was faced with the enjoyable prospect of a long hike up far too many stairs to retrieve his broom before making his way outside. Since Cyril was engaged with the Aurors, for whatever reason, Harry would switch to Plan B and locate the reprobates keeping an eye or three on Snape. With luck, he would

find them embedded in the Shrieking Shack, although he hoped they had taken the time to shower and freshen up a bit since his last visit.

Harry knew that it was a long hike to his suite, but when he arrived and picked up his broom, he was unprepared to be so drained that he was unable to bypass the layers of protections on his own bedroom window. Or, as Harry rapidly discovered, that he lacked the certainty of reserves to punch through any nearby window's protections. While he thought he might be able to break through a corridor window, or perhaps a classroom one, he disliked how much more vulnerable that would leave him. One of the last things he wanted to do in life was to walk around a bunch of wizards and witches he had no trust in while unable to defend himself should the need invariably arise.

Using his broom, however, he was able to slowly fly up the stairs to the top of the Astronomy Tower and exit the castle that way. The drawback was the low speed he had to maintain to avoid giving away his presence to anyone, or any painting, that he did not want to know he was out and about.

With the decision made to avoid any unnecessary magic for the moment, Harry opted to fly directly to the back door of the Shack rather than get around the Whomping Willow. That just required a physical lock bypass, but the Marauders had long since installed a magical equivalent to keyless entry if you knew where to tap your wand. Of course, failure to deactivate the locks by the right sequence of taps would cause all sorts of interesting things to happen to an interloper.

Consulting his watch, Harry tapped in the code sequence for the date, hour, and nearest five-minute block, along with his personal tag, to briefly deactivate the alarms and open the door. It had been demonstrated fairly early on in their little games that Harry had quite good vision and was able to see the sequences that Remus used when moving through protections at home. That had led to the rapid escalation of complexity in the ward control system, to the point where they now had codes that were safe to allow someone else to observe, as they would be unable to use the same code to get through the protections. To make things more interesting, where in the sequence of taps his personal tag was inserted varied based on

the hour and day. It was a simple evens-odds variation, but combined with all of them having a watch set fifteen minutes fast, it made a mixture of security through obscurity as well as some basic sound principles borrowed from Muggle banks. Regardless, they all were eager to find out who would be the first victim to suffer their joint wrath in any attempt to bypass the security restrictions they now routinely placed anywhere they frequented more than once or twice.

After he closed the door and waited for the soft click as the wards reactivated and the locks reset, Harry moved off into the Shack proper to locate his friends. Remus was sleeping soundly on a worn-out settee, but Sirius was hunched over their parchment map of Hogsmeade.

“We folded the Shack into the Map last night,” Sirius said without looking up. “Don’t think you’re getting any free shots with that Disillusionment Charm in place, Harry.”

Harry had to pause at that. “How’d you know about the Charm?”

“Moony’s latest,” Sirius said, and Harry could almost hear the smirk in the man’s voice. “It’s not all that reliable as to what exactly someone is hiding under, but it helps. And if you came in the back door, well, there’s really only one or two options, right?”

“Yeah, okay, Sirius.” Harry released the Disillusionment, even though Sirius was still focused on the map.

“Did you look up when you came in?”

“No, should I have?”

“Harry, Harry. I keep telling you, look up when you scan an area. Just because you can’t see it doesn’t mean it’s not there.”

“Yeah, yeah, all right, Sirius. I get it. I need to wake Moony up. We need to talk. Before I do, did anything odd happen around here after I left yesterday?”

Sirius was still hunched over the parchment, and Harry noticed the collection of butterbeer bottles around his godfather as well as a few haphazardly stacked plates and bowls. "Dunno," Sirius said after a moment. "Snape took off late last night, and we got a line on his direction. Unfortunately, we don't know exactly where, but it seems like it was the area near the Newcastle upon Tyne destination. He came back in about an hour, and Remus got a visual on him. He wanted you to know that Snape's wearing his Evil Cloak again."

Harry sighed briefly. "Right. So someone helped him remove the spells I put on him. What does that change?"

"Beats me."

"But nothing this morning? During the past couple of hours, maybe?" Harry hated the fact that his voice was coming close to a whinge, but he was just too tired to really care all that much at the moment.

"Nah, it's been pretty quiet around here. Why?"

"I had a rather bad morning. I need to talk to you lot about it." Harry felt like just curling up in the corner and forgetting everything, but he knew he had to get this information out. He needed to notify Vencil, Edgar, and Cyril as a minimum – but really his entire circle of conspirators should be notified of the complete mess this morning made of everything.

"Okay, wake up the wolf, and let's find out what's going on."

Ignoring Sirius' absent shoo-shoo motions, Harry walked over to his friend and stood carefully just at arms' reach of his feet. With a casual shake or two on the man's toes, Remus woke with a jolt, throwing his arms out wildly, and then swept the room visually. Harry waved vaguely from where he stood, happy to be out of the flailing reach of the werewolf. "Really, Remus, how does Tonks survive with you flailing like that all the time?"

Remus said nothing in response for a moment as he sat up and rubbed at his eyes. After a moment of stretching, he finally responded to the barb. "I thought you didn't want to hear the details?"

"I don't!" Sirius all but yelled. "That's my cousin!"

Harry grinned as Remus gave him an evil grin and a wink. He knew that this was an old topic now between the two Marauders, but it was always the vehicle for banter. "But she's such a sweet—"

"Remus! Don't make me hurt you!"

While Harry was amused to see the pair acting fairly normal, he also knew he was on a limited time budget. "Alright, you two," he said despite his grin, "let's settle down for a moment. We need to talk shop, since something happened this morning."

Sirius still had his head down, staring at the map, but Remus gave Harry his full attention and got comfortable on the settee. "Like what?"

Harry dropped into the other beat-up chair and surveyed his friend for a moment. "I had a little chat with Tom Riddle."

"What?!" Sirius was now standing, the parchment immediately forgotten.

"The map, Sirius?" Harry pointed out to his godfather.

While Sirius sank back down and glared at the map, he shot his own brand of sarcasm back at Harry. "Oh, right, I'll just study this thing while you talk about that bastard. Don't mind me, or that I can't concentrate."

"He's right," Remus said immediately. "He may as well ignore it for the moment. What do you mean, you had a chat? Your last chat was nearly fatal."

Sirius shoved the map off the table and rubbed his eyes, while Harry watched both of them collect themselves for a moment. "Before we

do this, you guys need to know I'm in the hospital wing again. I don't know when they'll let me out. You need to tell everyone what happened and get a copy of the memory and discussion to Vencil and Edgar at the least. Okay?"

"Right, right," Remus said with a wave. "Wait, memory? Why not your sensory monitor?"

"Riddle had a magical construct of some kind. My body didn't go anywhere, but our minds connected in some place where we could talk. It'll only show what happened in the aftermath of it all, not what I was seeing in my head."

Remus nodded slowly at the idea. "Alright. I don't have a Pensieve here. Did you bring that one I loaned you?"

Harry shook his head briefly. "No, I don't generally carry it around on me."

Remus stood and disappeared with a crack! Harry saw Sirius watching him nervously while Remus went off to get the family Pensieve from home.

"Why are you in the hospital wing?"

Harry shrugged slightly. "Magical backlash, burnout, uncontrolled accidental magic, that kind of thing."

Sirius paled slightly. "Accidental magic?"

"Yeah, well, Tom's visit was painful. I got a little angry, I guess, and I couldn't control it."

"How many people got hurt this time?"

Harry shrugged again, letting his silence answer the question. While he lacked an exact count, as he had failed to think of taking one on his way out, the bodies involved were numerous enough that it really mattered little what the final tally was.

With another crack!, Remus was standing where he had been previously, the large stone Pensieve from home held firmly in his hands. Remus swiftly but gently deposited it on the table that the parchment was on, motioning Harry to drop his memory into it.

With a sigh, Harry got up, and concentrated on everything that happened as soon as the regal owl landed in front of him. Depositing a copy of the memory into the Pensieve, he was somewhat surprised at how little substance there was, considering it apparently took place over the course of an hour or so.

Harry sat back down and let the chair hold him in place, as he was tired and the pain-managing potions were starting to wear off. Those types of healing aids were never meant to deal with active people, which was part of the reason why every Healer demanded that their patients rest quietly, or else the potions just wore off too quickly. Given the mild toxicity of the ingredients, more frequent doses were only done in dire situations, and he knew his burns were uncomfortable but not dire.

“Right. Before you start that playing, Remus, the setup here is that I was expecting some kind of package from Mrs Weasley. Ginny organised it for this morning, but we didn’t know what it would be. That’s the only owl that approached me, so I assumed it was from her, since she’s been trying to get me with packages and letters for a while now from random owls.” Harry sighed again, realising he truly did not know that all of those prior letters he had destroyed were from her. He could see the magic, and after the first few, just started destroying them before he switched modes to collection and payback.

Neither Remus nor Sirius said anything, but Remus did tap the side of the Pensieve. Immediately, the projection of the owl with its leg extended hovered above the bowl, and events ran forward right until Harry touched the orb. The memory flickered briefly to black, and then he was waking up in the hospital wing.

“Shit,” Harry muttered. “What the hell did he do?”

“I don’t know, Harry,” Remus said quietly. “You said it was a magical construct. The crystal was quite impressive to look at, but did Riddle tell you anything about it?”

Harry paused to scratch at his head absently, trying to recall the words Riddle had used. “Something about it being like an interactive Pensieve, but better.”

Remus in turn sat back and stared blankly at the ceiling for a while. “That’s surprising, really. But if we take what he said as somewhat true, it might explain things. He obviously had some enchantments on it to prevent this type of replay.”

Harry wanted to groan in frustration but settled for dropping his head into his hands. “Great. That means I have to remember everything.” Harry leaned back, and tried to focus on the events and words that Riddle had exchanged with him. It certainly had not felt like it took an hour or more to have their conversation, but time was funny when there was no external stimulus. Of course, there were all the fun possibilities of what Riddle may have done to the crystal ball.

“You’ll get a copy of this off to the others?”

Remus nodded quickly. “As soon as we’re done, Harry. I’ll use the Pensieve here to verify everything before I send out the copies for Vencil and Edgar. Then I’ll go round up the others while Sirius holds the fort here, and I’ll go through it with everyone else. I’ll see about contacting Cyril, but you may be the one that has to talk to him.”

Resigned to having to work his way back through everything, Harry relented, closed his eyes, and began the tale. He knew he was getting some words and details wrong, but he tried to convey not only the words and syntax, but semantic impressions, tone, and body language as well as he could remember them. He also articulated the actions he tried to take against Riddle as well as the pain sensations. At the end, he mentioned Healer Worthy’s comments about the headmaster and the seizures that had taken the man for a loop, and he wound down with his sneaking out of the infirmary.



When he was done, Harry was, inexplicably, happy to open his eyes and see that Remus and Sirius were staring at him just as dumbfounded and speechless as he himself had felt several times during the actual events. When neither of them made a motion, Harry gave them a wry half-smile and asked Remus to put the Disillusionment Charm back on his person and his broom. Remus moved on what seemed to be auto-pilot, doing the Charm, but still completely gob-smacked over the bizarre and disturbing events of the morning. With a wave that was only half-heartedly returned by his friends, Harry left the Shack by the back door.

With the Disillusionment that Remus had placed on him keeping his presence relatively free from observation, Harry reversed his path back to the Astronomy Tower and opted to keep his broom with him as he headed back to the infirmary. As though the Fates were feeling generous, the corridor outside the infirmary was now void of beds, and, best of all, the doors into the medical facility were propped wide open. He could hear some people moving about, so he slowed the broom to a complete stop and carefully dismounted. He wanted to be as quiet as possible as he sneaked back into his room, and even at slow speeds, the broom would be slightly nosier than his careful stealth. The enclosed space would also cause the Disillusionment Charm to be more noticeable unless he moved extremely slowly indeed, and those speeds were all but impossible to control on a racing broom.

As he inched his way through the infirmary doors, he saw all of the beds restored to their rightful locations, everything clearly scrubbed down and repaired. Even the door to his little room was repaired and stood wide open. While the illumination from the torches was fairly low, enough light was streaming through the windows to show that most beds were empty. He could see that Ginny and Neville were the only two patients left in the room, though there were several friends and family relations still attending the school sitting about their beds, and he could tell that Madam Pomfrey was up and bustling about in her office. The doors to the headmaster's room were closed now, but Harry had only one goal in mind, and that was to sneak back into his room and hope his little sojourn remained undiscovered.

As Harry finally slid around the open door into his private area, he came to a complete stop. The poor disguise he had left behind was missing, the room was a pristine and clearly scrubbed white, and all of the damaged items were restored to gleaming perfection. Healer Worthy was pacing stridently in the small room.

Somewhat chagrined at the idea of the lecture he knew was about to be delivered, Harry released the Disillusionment Charm and stood there quietly as she suddenly noticed his return.

“Mr Potter!” Healer Worthy was nearly incandescent in rage, though her voice was surprisingly quiet. “Where the hell have you been? Did I not tell you to stay in that bed?!”

Harry shrugged slightly. “I had to get my message out.”

“That disguise you left behind was pathetic! Why is it that characters like you and your Mentor ignore the advice of people trying to keep you alive?” She held up her hand abruptly before Harry could say anything at all. “Don’t answer that! Just get in bed!”

Harry gingerly climbed back into his bed, grateful that he could stop thinking for a while and maybe catch a nap. As he pulled the blankets back up, Healer Worthy came over and gave him a searing glare that he was sure could intimidate even Professor McGonagall. But then, considering the relationship between the two, it was clear that the new generation had learned from the best, and the new mistress of the craft was in the room with him.

“Since I clearly can’t trust you to follow any simple directions, you’ll be taking a Dreamless Sleeping Draught. Drink up!”

The last thing he recalled of the strange day was the stern Healer’s ire at his casual disobedience to her instructions. By the time she had pulled the goblet from his hands, he could feel his eyelids growing incredibly heavy.

“Rest now, Mr Potter. Let someone else fight for a while.”

A/N:

Thanks, as always, to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. Immeasurable thanks to Chreechree and cwarbeck for all their hard work. Thanks also to Reg and/or Lathac for Brit-picking, Treecat for slang checking, Sovran for a pre-publish sanity check, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before it gets uploaded.

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A/N:

Due to the length of the chapter, I put a special marker of “ xxx xxx” about half-way through. If you have a hard time reading all the way through a long chapter in one shot, take a break there and come back to the rest.

All other A/N commentary is at the end, folks. Particularly for you DLP fan-boy types.

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Chapter 26: Acts

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Thurs, 22 Aug 1991

He must not disturb them, he told himself, ignoring the warble in his thoughts from pain as he moved. It had been so long since he had known what it was like to be pain-free that he just accepted it as part and parcel of life. Life was better than it had been years ago, but he knew there was little hope of release from the hand he had been given. Long years had driven that message in fully.

Magic thrummed in his head as he surveyed the floor. It was time, no, it was almost time, yes, it was almost time. Time was hard to keep track of, but he knew it was important to do everything properly. Improper timing was bad, and bad meant punishment. Punishment was part of the Proper Order, for only punishment could make the bad good. That was the principle truth.

Good was what he was supposed to do. Yes, yes, good. He must do good, for in doing good, he pleased them, and in their pleasure, he was able to do that which he enjoyed, that which gave him value in life. He knew it was nearly time, and he knew it would be good, he just needed to get this done in time for the time to be right.

Holding out one hand, he swept it in an arc, slowly purging the floor of detritus that had invariably accumulated from the inhabitants of the rafters since the last time the time had been right. This was good, this was right, and the thrumming pleasure of the magic brought a faint smile to his lips. He was all but unaware of how the magic made him more alive than he had been seconds before, the little hope nestled deep inside reaffirmed.

With the floor cleaned, he moved over to stand under the rack of a dozen miniature bins, floating near the ceiling, and carefully cancelled the Hover Charms holding it up. As it gently descended to his level, he inspected each bin to be sure the stone was fully polished. A burst of magic here or there, and each bin was immaculate, almost gleaming in the early morning light. With a short step back, hand held out in careful concentration, he forced water from the bucket into every other bin until it was so full that surface tension was the only thing preventing the surplus from running across the floor.

He paused to enjoy the feeling of the magic as it lifted and channelled the water from the large bucket into the bins. The time was almost right, and this was good. This was proper. Wary of running out of time, to becoming the wrong time, he hurried to channel the pellets into those bins lacking water. Each bin rapidly filled with a small mound, the pellets arcing through the air as his magic commanded them to.

Without thought for the pellets that stopped their dance as he turned away, he scurried to the only other furniture in the room, negligently looking back to snap his fingers once sharply. The hover charms reengaged, and the platform of bins drifted back near the elaborate perches at the ceiling.

Before him stood a duo of glorious, alabaster unicorns, each half-reared in a unique pose as if preparing for battle, their posture and coats indistinguishable from reality. He knew visitors thought them

merely incredible likenesses, but the truth was there for anyone that wanted to look closer – they were quite real, but Petrified. He knew because his magic told him so. He could feel the trapped life within each mount. When he was young, he had felt regret for the unicorns. Now, he understood what the unicorns never would, and this was just the way things were. Time itself was no barrier to the cruel reality of life. Those things that were meant to be free, would be free, and their freedom was precious. Their freedom must be protected, for above all, it was fleeting. For everything else, there was an order, a place to fit, a role to fulfil, and a life irrevocable. He wished he had a true role, a purpose, but knew that such was not for him. He had found no purpose. No purpose beyond the magic.

Time was passing, and he became worried. It was almost the wrong time, but his task was not finished. Conjuring a cloth, he gently polished each horn jutting from the unicorns before wiping their coats down. He knew that the coats had to be kept in pristine condition, or else it would be bad. He shuddered to think of the last time he had been bad with the unicorns, so he kept his mind on the task under his hand, working out any dust or insects that sought to lay claim to the unicorns. Their exteriors were far too fragile in the suspended state, so it was a task of manual labour, one that he enjoyed regardless of what it was he really was engaged in. Abrasive magical cleaning day-in and day-out would mar the beauty, the terrible beauty of the mated pair.

Just as he finished, it went from the right time to the wrong time, and a lone great eagle swept into the small room, searching for a place to land. With obvious reluctance, the massive bird eventually dropped onto one of the unicorn horns, shifting around in nervousness as it tried to settle from its flight. The bird's distaste for the perch was etched in its half-parted beak, its half-opened wings, and its keening cry of anger.

He hardly noticed. His vision was locked on the letter tied to the leg of the eagle, the one his magic remembered. The letter thrummed on its own, and it radiated a sense of power and command that he recognised immediately. Unable to stop himself, he shivered violently as he looked at the oddly unfamiliar writing scrawled on the outside.

It was too late, it was the wrong time, wrong time, so very wrong time. He moaned in his fear, knowing that this was a portent of horrible things.

Freedom was the little hope he longed for in the silence of his heart, but the best he could expect was to watch others enjoy it. Those that were meant to be free, were free, would be free, must be free, until there was no freedom. For everything else, everything without freedom, there was a role to fill. Hesitantly, he untied the letter from the eagle, which immediately launched itself off the unicorn and back into the sky, the wail of horror and keening fading with the bird as it bore angry witness to the clouds. He was left holding the letter, watching the bird fly into the heavens, and lamenting that his own role was so much lower than that of the great bird of prey stooped in servitude to carry messages. He longed sometimes to fly away with the birds, but those were bad thoughts, and the binding too strong.

Unable to stop the shudders, he rapidly moved down from the Owlery into the manor proper. He ignored the view of the large and heavy iron gates and the highly-ordered grounds as he scurried down from the tower. He was in such a rush and shaking so badly by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs that he almost fell and broke his own neck. That would be escape, an almost freedom, yes, but it would leave his work undone, that would be bad. That would be bad, bad. Bad means punishment. He was conflicted for a moment, unsure whether he should admit the bad for the punishment, delaying the letter, because the delay in delivering the letter would be bad, worse bad, and the punishment much, much worse. He would be bad twice as much that way, rather than if he delivered the letter now and punished himself after. That was less bad, but bad needed punishment.

With the decision made, he all but ran to the door of the study. He must not transport about the Manor, it was bad, bad because it made things happen that were not supposed to happen unless the wrong time was here. It was the wrong time, but not that wrong time. Wrong time, wrong time.

Rapping sharply on the door, he pushed it open and kept his eyes on the floor, shuffling in as quickly as he could. He was bad. He had bad

thoughts of almost freedom, but he had to deliver the letter. The letter had to be handed over. Yes, handed over.

“Stop shaking!” The voice was laden with contempt and irritation, but he could not suppress the violent tremors in his extended hand. The letter was snatched from his hand, and he promptly picked up the cane by the desk and beat himself about the head with it. He had only landed two blows before the cane was forcibly removed from his hands and a boot launched him across the room. “Out!” The imperious order was clear, and nothing could be more important than being out of the room. Unbidden, the writing came to mind again.

Lucius Malfoy

Wayward Servant

Malfoy Manor

Fear was with him, killing his mind. Without thinking, his magic thrummed, and he transported himself to just outside the study door. Bad, bad, bad. Bad thoughts on freedom, bad shaking hand, bad for moving how he was not supposed to, he was bad, bad, bad. He was still beating himself about the head, making the bad good with the metal gewgaw in the shape of a serpent, when the voice came again. The previous imperiousness had been replaced with overtones of urgency.

“Dobby!”

oOo oOo oOo

Tue, 24 Dec 1991

“Grand-ma?”

“Yes, Harry?” Perenelle turned from watching the passers-by and regarded the young man by her side. Harry was looking around at all the people in Diagon Alley, secure in his disguise and charms, as were they all on this cold and windy day. For some reason, he



seemed rather anxious today, but she thought it was likely just the Christmas season and perhaps, to a lesser extent, nervousness from all the people crowding the shopfronts. Even with the disguises and glamours, they rarely ventured into crowded places where other magical people congregated.

“Why does Grand-dad Nicolas want to get these books so much?”

Perenelle sighed. Harry had, naturally, brought up a point that she and Nicolas had been arguing over for some time. She felt that Harry had no need to learn the types of things Nicolas was planning to teach him, as she knew how dangerous such knowledge could be even to a trained mind, let alone a developing one. “They are very rare, Harry,” she said after a moment. “When he learned they would be available, he wanted to get them not only so that others would not, but also because he feels there are things he can teach you from them.”

“But you don’t like them, do you?”

His open green eyes made her sad, as she could clearly read their pain. He had learned to set it aside, but it was still there if you knew how to look for it. Regardless, it had been an interesting two years, and she would never think of giving up her time with her new yet motley family. Harry’s question went to the heart of the matter, but the implication was that he knew she had been arguing with her husband over the books. And this was despite the heavy warding they had done after magically expanding the above-garage flat that Remus had been living in, moving Remus into the house proper with David and Harry.

Sighing, she wrapped one arm around Harry’s shoulders, pulling him into her side as she walked with him towards the windows of an apothecary next to the intersection of streets. “No, Harry, I don’t.” She pitched her voice low and trusted Harry to keep still so that her whispers would be sufficient. “These books . . . they are full of Dark things, and I wish they did not exist. But wishing does not change facts, and we must live in a world that is not what we wish it to be.”

As they stopped and looked without seeing through the over-sized panes, she kept her eyes on the reflections of the people behind them as she expressed her concerns. "You must understand, Harry, that Dark magic is insidious for many reasons. One of the worst is that it's addictive, and you won't realise it until it's too late." She saw two shoppers collide briefly and tensed her arm around Harry's shoulder. "Promise me, Harry, that you will not practice these things. Learn of them, research the tools and methods of your opponents, but do not directly use this knowledge yourself."

Harry was silent for a while, and she let him have the peace to think about what she had said. Nicolas had been working with Harry since finally taking him on as an official Student back in early April. The tutoring and studies that Remus and Nicolas had kept Harry engaged in prior to that status change were subject to far too much paperwork should they be discovered, so Nicolas had persuaded the family to enrol Harry as his War Mage Student. It was non-binding, with the majority of Students ultimately finding the role undesirable and withdrawing before the Apprentice stage was reached. Regardless, it had neatly outflanked the various restrictions the British Ministry insisted on imposing over any and all magic use throughout their isles. The family's efforts to mask everything had made a haven of sorts, although it was incredibly brittle in many respects, but now they were free to be more indiscriminate when away from the Eagle's Nest.

"What if it's the only way to win? Or save someone's life?"

Harry's question jarred her back from her thoughts, and she implicitly understood what he was asking. If he knew how to do these things, and he could save someone – someone like his mother, real or adopted – why would he not use the skills that would save a life, a loved one? She turned to face Harry fully, resting her hands on his shoulders. It was always startling to realise that Harry was growing tall. Soon she would not be looking down at him but rather looking equally at him.

"That's why they are so insidious, Harry. You might be able to use them once and get away with it. But then next time, you will think you escaped the last time, so once more is acceptable. That voice telling

you these things is the one that came into being on the first use, and it will grow stronger each time.” She made sure his eyes were on hers before she finished. “It would be a short time indeed before you became that which you hate, Harry.”

She was pleased to see him nod his understanding, although she could tell it was not truly real to him. His lack of personal experience with addiction was what made Nicolas’ plan all the more dangerous in her mind. Were Harry older and more experienced in life overall, rather than having too much experience with narrow topics, she would be less concerned. In many aspects of living, however, Harry was an innocent who lacked the direct and hard-won knowledge of life’s painful lessons. On the other hand, in those experiences she never wanted anyone to go through, he had far too much knowledge and understanding.

“Will you promise me to not directly use this knowledge, then, Harry?”

She could tell he was reluctant, but she could also see the desire to please her and do as she asked coming to the fore. She knew that once he gave his word, she would fear things less, but she would still be worried for her adopted grandchild. His life was far too full of trouble to take risks such as these without caution.

“My lady,” a warm voice said next to her, one arm firmly wrapping around her shoulders. She had known that voice now for well over six centuries and knew that she would be able to pick it out of a crowded room full of impersonators. She let her pleasure at his return grace her face as she pulled her arms from Harry and pulled her husband to her.

Stepping back for a moment, she could tell that something was wrong. Remus stood with Harry, his hand loosely clasped upon Harry’s shoulder, as the two men regarded her solemnly. “What is wrong, husband?”

Nicolas frowned slightly, and she knew it irritated him that he was never able to hide anything from her. During their courtship it drove

him to great lengths to discover her secret, but only because he never believed her. Her answer had not changed through the many years, but it had become a bit of a game between them.

“They are gone, sold already.” Nicolas had a grimace on his face, one that she thought was far more like a child’s pouting than a grown man’s ire. It never helped when she smiled at him in his moods, but she could not help seeing the handsome young man she had been courted by, no matter the years that may have elapsed since then. In her mind, he would always have that vibrant smile and the eyes that held secrets beyond imagining.

Setting aside her thoughts, she contemplated the implications of her husband’s statement. That the books were still out there was unchanged from before, but the fact that they were now circulating in England after crossing over from Eastern Europe was disturbing. “And do you know to whom they were sold?”

Nicolas shook his head, and she knew he was telling her that he had failed to learn by any means where and to whom they had been sold. That spoke of either memory charms or other powerful magic, for Nicolas, as a full War Mage, had rights and skills that others did not when it came to obtaining information. She decided that they would be discussing events that evening, for she would not let Nicolas keep whatever information he had gleaned to himself.

With grace and practice honed through time, she put a pleasant smile on her face and turned back to Harry and Remus. She could discern the werewolf’s lingering tension from the recent full moon. “Well, since our reason for being here is lost, shall we do any shopping? Or would you rather just go home for tea?”

She could see the hint of excitement in Harry’s face, as any opportunity to see more of the world he was a part of, yet apart from, always interested him. This caused Remus to smile in turn, and she knew he could read Harry as well as she could. They had all completed their Christmas shopping before Hogwarts released its students, deliberately avoiding the chance of Harry running into a crowd of other children. Now, however, she was willing to relax the rules slightly and let Harry explore, despite the many children present.

With all other shopping done, the three adults could monitor both the area and Harry to be sure that nothing was risked. As she felt her smile transition from forced to natural, she swept her Nicolas along with her as their arms entwined. “I can see the answer, so I’ll just say this once. You must have one of us with you at all times, Harry, all right? Now, do lead us where you would like to go.”

As she strolled along behind Harry and Remus, she enjoyed the brisk weather, although it was a tad more uncomfortable for her than for her boys. There was something fundamentally unfair about using Warming Charms when moving about outside in the winter season unless you were doing something that truly warranted it. Harry was making an obvious beeline for the Quidditch shop, talking in rapid-fire excitement as he gestured with his hands. Ever since she had let Remus talk her into getting a Nimbus for Harry in September, he had spent most of his free time pushing the boundaries on the wards they would temporarily erect at fields near their home for his ‘lessons’ – as if the boy needed anything as mundane as lessons that they could ever teach about flying. She turned and shared a smile with her Nicolas, as it was obvious that he was thinking the same thing she was. Their long time together made such things quite common.

In truth, she was willing to let Harry wander a bit as they had also promised to keep Harry away from the house for at least two hours. That would give David plenty of time for wrapping presents. His work schedule during the holidays was difficult and tiring, but, since he had the next week off, she had been hard-pressed to persuade both him and Harry to actually go to bed last night. Both had been too busy trying to repair an old O-gauge train set that David had dragged out of the storage cupboard. The tracks were running all around the modest Christmas tree that Remus had procured, and it became a challenge to work out exactly what incline the engine could ascend while pulling a set of cargo cars loaded with sweets.

Her reminiscing came to a stop as she realised that Harry and Remus had stopped talking animatedly, and Remus was leaning down, partially in front of Harry, the two talking quietly but urgently as they walked somewhat slower. Remus stood abruptly and motioned for she and her husband to close the distance and join them.

“Nicolas,” Remus said quietly, “you’ve been working with Harry on his vision problems. Harry’s telling me that he’s having a hard time seeing the man in front of us, the one with the odd headpiece.”

“Oh?” Nicolas disengaged from her arm and traded places with Remus. She took Remus’ graciously extended elbow but stayed close to her husband to hear what was being said. “Harry, what type of problem is it?”

From talking to Nicolas, she knew that Harry’s vision problems were nothing of the sort, but rather were an over-sensitization to strong magic. Nicolas was convinced that there was more to it than that, which had been one of the many points in the argument to keep Harry out of Hogwarts, but they had not yet come to a true understanding of the intermittent phenomenon. “He keeps disappearing, like he’s walking through muddy water.” She could see Harry’s hands move to his face and knew he was probably rubbing at his eyes again. David had been most concerned that Harry might need glasses, but Nicolas had shown the fear invalid with a few simple tests.

“How would you say he appears muddy? Like he’s brown? Or something else?”

“No, darker than that.” Harry walked a little faster to get closer to the man, who was still in front of them by several yards. With pressure upon his arm, Perenelle urged Remus to keep up with Nicolas and Harry. “You know how at dusk, when a bird flies by, and you can see it for a few moments, and then you can’t? He keeps coming and going like that.”

Everything stopped, however, as Harry clapped both hands to his forehead and fell limply to the ground.

oOo oOo oOo

Thu, 14 Sep 1995

Harry sat up abruptly, rubbing at his forehead, which throbbed in time to his pulse. A lingering echo of pain long past followed the vestiges of dreams into the darkness, but the blankets he was half entombed in kept him from leaping out of the bed as his reflexes demanded. Instead, he found himself half leaning over the edge of the bed, the railing on the side the only thing that kept him from landing nose-first on the ground.

With a deep breath, Harry heaved himself back into the sheets and lay supine upon the bed as he let his consciousness reacclimatise to the quiet of the room and the dead of the night. With a reluctant glance at his watch, he realised it was half-past the witching hour, and the drug-induced haze imparted by healing potions was quite finished. There would be no return to sleep anytime soon, not with the lingering fringes of pain and memories better lost in time than burning in hollow laughter.

Resigned to the inevitable outcome, Harry disengaged himself from the mummifying grasp of the blankets and slid onto the floor. Healer Worthy had told him he would be relatively normal “tomorrow morning,” and it was certainly that now. She had warned him of several treatments that would conclude late the previous evening, so as far as he was concerned, he was free to depart, given that he was awake and the Sleeping Draught was no longer actively suppressing his faculties.

While the hospital wing pyjamas were as uncomfortable as his memory reminded him, it was a dawning sensation that he had indeed worn them during his sojourn to the Shrieking Shack yet had failed to notice them. Now, with the various potions’ potency faded to almost nothing, Harry was acutely aware that the pyjama material was irritating his nerve endings. Idly, he wondered if that was a calculated effect, but regardless it was readily corrected. A short but quiet search to locate his former clothing turned up the items, although they were in somewhat worse condition than he could recall seeing them in last – they were but remnants and tatters, with the edges burned on the remainder. One sigh of reluctance later, Harry had Transfigured his pyjamas into the thick and soft variant he had worn during his prior unintentional visit. It was a further drain on his

core, which he knew would still be low for at least most of the day to come, but it was worth it just for the comfort.

Gathering up the tatters of his prior clothes, Harry wrapped the bundle around his broom and quietly pushed open the door into the main infirmary. Immediately he saw a bright flash of magic, and he was almost positive he heard a faint bell sounding somewhere. Looking carefully about, he saw Ginny and Neville still in their beds, fast asleep, but otherwise there was nothing even remotely out of place. The entire wing was quite dim, and he hurried for the doors.

On his second step, he heard a harshly whispered "Stop!" from behind him. Harry turned in place to see Healer Worthy bustling toward him, her wand prominently displayed. "And just where do you think you're going, Mr Potter?"

"To my own bed?" Harry thought that answer was at least reasonably safe, even if it was somewhat less than accurate.

"Do you have my permission to leave?"

Harry had to admire how the woman's tenacity regarding his health kept her so engaged, but at the same time he wished he had thought to check for traps before leaving the room. He was now certain that she had placed some type of trigger alarm on the door, not trusting him to stay in his bed even under the influence of potions. That required a mental note to increase the personal paranoia level when inadvertently staying in the infirmary in the future. "Well, you did tell me that the last treatment I'd need was before bedtime last night and that I'd be mostly normal the next morning. You do know it's the next morning presently, right?"

Healer Worthy's expression was enough to cause Harry to take one step back, subconsciously preparing to defend himself. He had the distinct impression that no one had ever used her own words against her before in such a literal fashion. There was always hope that Cyril had beat him to it so she would feel less compelled to beat him back into need of potions. "Yes," she finally ground out, as though the



admission cost her part of her soul. "I suppose I did. And do you think you're well enough to be up and about?"

Harry shrugged briefly. "All things considered, the trolls aren't complaining much."

"Trolls, Mr Potter?"

"I've never seen my own insides, right? So how do I know there aren't a bunch of little trolls running around in there, making it all work, and faking symptoms? Maybe it's all just a big conspiracy from Healers?" Harry gave her his best grin, though he hoped it was less like the one Neville was so worried about. "Oh, I've seen blood and bits and pieces, but that doesn't rule out my troll conspiracy theory."

"I see." Healer Worthy gave him a level look before the corner of her mouth twitched slightly. "And they just happen to have a good drum set in there, then?"

"Sure. It's a bit monotonous, I'd think, but it's probably just a cadence beat to let the others keep track of time."

"Somehow, Mr Potter, I don't have a hard time imagining that you are made up of little trolls." She let out a long sigh before glancing at her own watch. "And what assurances do I have that you'll actually go to bed? You seem to have a record of being . . . somewhat delusory in your actions."

"Oh, that hurts," Harry murmured. "Delusory? I'd much rather think I'm being roguish."

"It happens to be a perfectly cromulent characterisation, and you know it. Now answer the question, or else I'm going to fetch another Sleeping Draught and let your kidneys remind you tomorrow not to be pretentious with your Healer."

Harry immediately held up his hands, knowing full well the ache that over-dosing some medications could cause. "Right, then. I propose to fly myself back to my rooms, change into some respectable clothes,

write a lengthy message for Cyril, and then sleep. Of course, should I happen to find Cyril awake and alone, I'll substitute a discussion for the message."

He watched as she tapped her wand tip slowly into her left hand, somehow knowing he had won this particular skirmish even if she was putting on a show about it. He suspected the crackdown was more a lingering desire to make it clear he was to follow medical instructions, despite his own notions or prior history with the matter.

"Very well, Mr Potter. I'll release you. I expect you to check in with Madam Pomfrey both tomorrow evening and anytime the day after. No dodging this, all right?"

Harry agreed with a nod rather than risking more banter. It was always possible she might change her mind. With her sharp nod in return, he watched her stalk back towards Madam Pomfrey's office before he turned to leave. He stopped, however, when he saw Ginny's eyes reflecting the light. It was apparent that she had been awake for at least some of the exchange with Healer Worthy, but he was uncertain whether he was ready to have the conversation he needed to with her. It was something better handled with more time lapsed since events transpired, given that neither one of them would benefit from the buffer of fading memories if it was dealt with now. At the same time, he felt somewhat obligated to at least see if she wanted to talk, given how she had risked her life – even if it had merely been unwittingly.

"All right, there, Ginny?" he asked quietly as he stopped by her bed.

She no longer had bandages covering her that he could see, but her pale skin left her looking somewhat worse than she likely felt. Her eyes were watching him, and her facial expression was preternaturally calm.

"You don't really let yourself think about it, do you?" Her voice conveyed the same eerily placid demeanour she was projecting, even though her voice was barely louder than a whisper.

“Ah, think about what?” Her question was so vague and poorly framed for context that she may as well have been asking about the weather on the moon.

“Your life. What you’ve seen, what you’ve done, what’s been done to you.”

For this, Harry had no answer. He knew it was a topic he was completely unwilling to discuss with her, especially considering the complete lack of security around them. “You don’t really expect me to answer that, do you?” He recognised that his tone was cooler than he had intended, but she had asked a rather personal question.

“No, not really.” She paused and continued to stare at him for a moment. “I don’t think you have an answer, actually.”

For some reason, Harry found her comment irritating. Not only had she asked him what could only be considered a deeply personal question, but she had openly doubted he had the presence of mind to be introspective when needed. Her entire reaction to his polite query was nothing short of inexplicable. “I see. When you spend a day in my shoes, we can talk about it. Did you think about your actions at breakfast?”

Her hidden reservoir of acceptance and peace was starting to really grate on his nerves as she continued to regard him without any obvious reaction. “Sort of.” He watched her shrug absently and stare blankly at one of the torches on the wall. “At the time, it was obvious you were in pain. I wanted to remove the thing from your hand, since it had to be the source of the problem.”

“Right. So with your advanced wisdom, did you stop and think what that might do to you?” She looked at him again but still failed to react. “Let me make it clearer. You risked your life for something you knew nothing about.”

“I think you’re exaggerating, Harry.” She looked sheepish for only the faintest of heartbeats. “All right, I did get hurt, as did others, but none of it was from the orb. It was all from you, or so I was told.”

Harry found himself sitting in the chair, unable to grasp the idea that she had no appreciation for how dangerous her acts were, regardless of the source of danger. "You don't know, do you?" he finally asked.

"Know what?"

It was her blithe indifference and casual demeanour that finally drove the reality home. She truly had no idea what she had briefly come into contact with, and now he could either tell her or let her continue in her ignorance. "That orb wasn't from your mum, you know that much, right?"

"Of course. Mum might be right hacked off, but she wouldn't deliberately hurt you like that – well, not without a lot of cause."

"Then let me educate you. That orb was from my dear old friend Tom Riddle. Of course, you know him better as Lord Voldemort." As her eyes slowly opened wider, it became clear that her initial reaction was disbelief, yet it moved quickly to a very disturbed acceptance.

"H-how do you know it was h-him?" For some perverse reason, Harry was happy her serenity was well and truly shattered.

"Oh, he told me, of course. It was a little toy he came up with so we could have a quick chat." Harry shrugged absently at her look of creeping horror. "He's not my favourite correspondent, you might say."

"W-what did he want?"

Harry decided that he would simply ignore the question and instead bring up the conversation he wanted to have with her rather than the one she was having with him. "I'm inclined to release you from your pledge to me and tell you to train on your own. I could probably provide some books you could read."

“What?! Why?” Her harsh whisper was so loud that Harry promptly cast a sound muffling spell around them to prevent waking Neville or drawing the ire of a resident Healer.

That done, he turned back to Ginny, only to see that her complexion was apparently battling between pale and flushed in anger, but he was not particularly interested in her thinking on the topic. “You want me to spell it out? I always knew that coming here would be telling Riddle where to find me, and it traps me here. Anyone that I’m too friendly with will be of great interest to him, and if I train you, I’ll be spending the most time here with you out of everyone. What do you think that’s likely to make him do?”

Ginny opted to remain quiet, but he knew she understood from the downcast expression she wore. “That’s right. And if you get killed from hanging around me, what do you think your mum would have to say about it? I’m already on her bad side just for you getting dinged up a bit. What do you think that would do to her, after how she lost her brothers years ago?”

It took him a minute to realise what he was seeing, but it finally registered that Ginny was scared. She seemed to react slightly when he mentioned her mother’s lost brothers, but there was obviously something more going on. What, exactly, she was afraid of was unclear, but he understood that she was. “Harry, what if I don’t care?”

“It’s not about you, Ginny. It’s about what’s right and that, according to the law, you’re not allowed to make that decision for yourself.”

“But I need to know what you know! And I can’t ask my parents!” Based on how flushed her skin was becoming, he felt that her fear was giving way to her growing anger,

“Why, Ginny? You wouldn’t tell me before. If you want me to consider continuing this, give me a reason.”

Harry was apparently privileged to see Ginny Weasley run through a gamut of emotions as she looked away and reverted back to her almost tangible fear. Whatever lay at the root of her problems, he

knew, was not something simple or mundane. Since he had never bothered to keep track of the Weasleys' history before, he had a complete lack of knowledge of what drove her.

Harry was willing to give her some time to decide, but without an explanation, he was no longer going to be involved with her training directly. It was safer for her and probably safer for him as well. While he waited, Harry began a series of relaxation exercises meant to calm a turbulent mind, wrapped up with breathing rhythm and reflection.

His focus was lost when Ginny finally interrupted him. "Harry, how . . . how secure is it to talk here?"

Harry shrugged. "It's not. I've got some minor protections up, but I'd avoid any hard details for now."

Ginny nodded slowly, and if anything, she hunched lower in her bed as she almost comically pulled the blankets firmly around her, leaving only her face and hair exposed. "You know I have six brothers, right?"

"Yes."

"I want you to put yourself in my shoes for a minute." Her voice dropped to a faint whisper, and Harry leaned forward, placing his head near the side of the bed to hear her clearly. "You're given an . . . an offer. You can agree to do something you don't want to, to go along with . . . be something you're not, and you have . . . promises, backed by vows, that you'll be . . . treated . . . well . . . even though you're a bit sceptical about it. But if you refuse . . . if you refuse, one of your b-brothers will be required to take your place, and you know that he will d-d-die, s-slowly and p-painfully." It was clear that Ginny had never talked about this and that she was fighting to keep her emotions in check. "Or that if you t-talk about it, to anyone, the same end comes – one of them d-dies . . . slowly and painfully. And there's n-nothing that can be done to prevent it. What would you do?"

Harry had a very hard time believing that such a situation could exist, particularly the nothing-can-be done part. He was a firm believer that

one always had options, and when all else failed, careful application of violence could remove most barriers to life's little challenges. And yet, there was something faintly ironic in what she was describing. In many ways, Riddle's offer had the same overtones – he could almost hear Riddle speaking again in the back of his head, a soft voice of sweet reason, 'do this with me, and things will get better, but otherwise, who knows what will happen, Harry, maybe they will get worse.' Regardless, Ginny was not at the mercy of Riddle, and Harry hoped to keep it that way. Her problems, therefore, had to stem from some other factor. "Frankly? I'd kill anyone that tried that with me, or anyone that supported them."

He had hoped for a bit of a smile in return, but she merely shook her head. "You might be able to do that, Harry, but I can't. But if you had to . . . g-go along with . . . it, wouldn't you want to know how to . . . protect yourself?"

"It can't be that simple, Ginny. Your parents would get involved, they would get the Aurors involved, and would track down whoever was taken. It's very, very hard to kidnap anyone magical."

Ginny laughed bitterly, which surprised Harry. "That's just it, Harry. It wouldn't be kidnapping, and it would all be by the Ministry's own rules."

Harry shook his head. "That's not poss—" Harry's own voice trailed off as he thought about it further. It actually might be possible, he supposed, given all of the other random things he had found possible through the hodgepodge of esoteric rules that made up most wizarding societies. "Okay, maybe it is possible, but I'm having a hard time accepting that it's the entirety of your problem. Not by a long shot, I'd say."

Ginny shook her head slightly, the red hair billowing up behind her head. "I never said it was all, Harry, but I don't think I can tell you any more, not right now."

Her pointed look around the room made it clear that even if he badgered her, she would refuse since he had previously admitted to

the lack of security. "I see. And because of this, you think I should train you?"

Ginny said nothing for a while, and they eventually locked gazes when Ginny turned to look at him rather than the ceiling. "Why is it, Harry, that you are allowed to learn these things and no one else is? Why do you get the special treatment? Anyone else who did even a fraction of what you've done since arriving here would have been thrown out ages ago."

Harry had to pause at that question. He made it a habit to keep some things secret, just for the sake of the practice, but there were other things which were dangerous to tell. He had told Ginny and her friends some minor bits and pieces around a Pensieve, but this was more than that and would invariably be told to others. That could only further alienate him from making genuine friends and allies at the school, although he was beginning to suspect that trying to make friends was pointless and unnecessarily risky. "Once upon a time, there was this really annoying Seer that made a true prophecy. You could say that dealing with Riddle is my job, thanks to that Seer."

"Your job?"

"Fate's not in my good graces. Or maybe I'm not in hers. Whichever."

"So you do what you do, learn what you can, just so you can make Fate happy? And that makes you like this?"

Harry shrugged briefly. "Not much I can do about it. Riddle believes in what the Seer said, so I don't have the luxury of ignoring it." He sighed deeply and began idly playing with the seams on his Transfigured pyjamas. "Honestly, I kind of hate it. I wish I could be like Neville, you know? One more kid in a crowd of kids, not this focal point for life's pent-up frustrations."

Ginny was silent again for a few moments before she went back to ceiling-gazing. "Really, Harry, you may hate it, but can you honestly say you'd trust anyone else with this 'job'?"



Harry snorted by reflex. "That's a pointless question, Ginny. I can name a dozen people who, if you asked them that, especially in reference to taking down Riddle, they would all answer 'no' with the firm belief that they, and they alone, were the best man or woman for the job. So how am I somehow better than those others? Or the ones you don't ask?"

"Harry," Ginny sighed, "those others might think that way, but they aren't the ones with the job, are they?"

"Oh, right, and that makes me more qualified. Thanks for that, now I can be happy with my lot in life." Harry laughed harshly, his mind dredging up memories that he preferred to keep buried in vaults. "I'll just pick some flowers now and give them to passers-by, shall I?"

"Grow up, Harry," Ginny said with some heat. "You've been here barely two weeks. You've removed the major dangers from Hogwarts, bypassed the Minister for Magic, and thwarted the man's chosen representative. All while casually breaking most of the rules of magic that Hermione likes to talk about. If you don't think that's a sign that you're more capable than anyone else here, even the Headmaster, then you're mental."

He wanted to shake her, to tell her that those things were not his acts alone, that he had a large supporting group that prepared him to deal with those issues. He never came to Hogwarts blind. He knew who would be a problem before ever getting on the train. At the same time, he could see it from her point of view. He had done those things, and his support network was unknown. For all intents and purposes, it made Harry appear as though he was a formidable opponent, but the reality was that he was merely the front man for a potent mix of hacked-off minds. "So because you see it that way, even though I don't, you want me to teach you?"

Ginny nodded briefly, the motion screwing her hair up into a strange shape on the pillow. "If not you, Harry, then whom?"

Harry said nothing and only sat there contemplating the situation. Ginny had, at best, given him a tiny hint about what her problems were. Despite the surreal idea of it, he knew that it was probably true on some level, or, at least, she assumed it was true, though she may have lacked the resources to verify it as Truth and been left with only pieces of truth. It was something he would need to discuss with Edgar, at any rate, when he next crossed paths with the vampire.

“I’ll think about it.” Ginny looked hopeful at that, so Harry shook his head. “I’m not saying whether I’ll continue training you or not. After yesterday’s fiasco, I can’t do anything today anyway, so I’ll think about it. You’ll also need to tell me more, but not right now. You can keep up with the conditioning and drills without me, though, and we’ll talk again before tonight, right?”

Ginny gave him a half-hearted smile. “Right.” Harry rose, but Ginny caught his arm before he could turn away. “Harry, I haven’t said it before, but thanks. Thanks for helping me.”

“I hope it does help, Ginny. You should get some sleep, though.” With a short wave of his hand in farewell, Harry dropped the privacy charms and left the infirmary.

Though he had told Healer Worthy he was headed back to his bed, Harry had no intention of doing so immediately. At a minimum, he would just toss and turn for hours, achieving nothing, and he had quite a few other things he really should think about in the solitude of the evening hours. Securing time during the day for careful analysis was well nigh impossible.

At the same time, he had a craving for some food, so a detour to the kitchen was in order. With Healer Worthy’s consent to return to his room, Harry felt safe in openly travelling the corridors – after all, he was only on his way back and had managed to get lost, should someone stop him and ask his business. Sometimes it was convenient being perceived as new to a location.

His side-trip yielded a rather large and excellent bit of flummery in an oversized napkin. With that tucked under his arm, a jug of pumpkin

juice in one hand, and the tattered remnants of his clothing in the other, he guided his broom to the top of the Astronomy Tower. Only after he had settled himself on the edge of the parapet did he consider himself lucky that no late-night tryst had been in progress during his arrival.

The sweet but spice-free confection was a sharp contrast to the flavourful but barely sweetened juice as he considered the situation. Riddle knew where he was, but that fact had been inevitable ever since agreeing to come to Hogwarts. Dumbledore's condition was not generally known, which probably kept Riddle from coming to collect Harry forthwith – which meant that on some level, getting Dumbledore healthy was a paramount concern. Since arriving, Harry had managed to secure the antipathy of most of the school, which was beneficial in some ways but definitely not part of the plan they had all formulated before he left.

Regardless of any plan they may or may not have had, however, Riddle's contact yesterday was nothing short of baffling. It went without question that Riddle was a master of magic; that he could use magic in ways that Harry could not even conceive of. When Remus and Riddle had their tête-à-tête in the graveyard of Little Hangleton, it had been a demonstration of Riddle's profound classical understanding and repertoire of magic used in a direct manner against Remus' solid new theoretical knowledge and diabolical instincts. Remus had been on the losing end of the battle, and Riddle had left before the situation could get any worse. The worst damage to his reborn body had been mostly pride and a few broken bones. Remus had been not so lucky, and it had been far too close for Harry's comfort. He was unwilling to accept the loss of anyone else, and he wanted justice, if not outright revenge, for those who had made his life what it was.

Yet justice was a fleeting concept, like a fluid that never stayed still or held one shape for more than the time it took to blink. Riddle's overtures of peace and confession of repentance were a conundrum he was hard-pressed to claim understanding of, let alone acceptance of the words themselves. The idea of Riddle being truthful was, at best, amusing, but Harry knew the believable lie always interwove the lie with parts of truth. As Edgar had pointed out frequently, the word

believable was spelled to demonstrate it. The vampire's constant motto crept into his mind, 'facts are irrelevant, only perception matters.'

To explore the veracity of Riddle's claims was an exercise in futility, which Harry understood quite well in principle. Therefore, the facts truly were irrelevant. The perception that was left, however, was not easily classified – Harry's perception of guile and misdirection was at cross-purposes to Riddle's newfound attitude of sorrow and his promises of binding vows to stop. The claims to being nearly immortal were easy enough to believe, given the Horcrux problem, yet if Harry helped the man complete his quest for immortality in exchange for a cessation of killing, what would he truly be agreeing to? That was the question for which he could find no answer.

Would he be making Riddle immortal or be walking into a trap? Or both? Would Riddle go to Azkaban forever or only for a few decades? If you were immortal, time held little meaning.

For that matter, Harry had no idea precisely how Riddle had discovered his relatives or what had happened when Harry was living with the Dursleys. Harry knew that such details were of little import now, not when compared to the bigger picture in play. It still was one question among many stemming from the things that Riddle either revealed outright or hinted at in their dialogue. To what level could this "new" Riddle be believed? That was the question he needed to consider above all others.

If Riddle did repent and go to his chastisement, he would turn over the Death Eaters whole-sale, and between their acts, history, and Riddle's potential testimony, that would be enough to radically clean up the magical society in England. The ramifications of that fallout alone would send shock waves through the entire system, possibly even to the Muggles, as the bribery and corruption would be revealed for what it was rather than masquerading under dubious titles and charitable contributions.

While such idle speculations might be pleasant to consider, Harry could not shake the feeling that Riddle's words were honeyed venom, and should he fail to agree with Riddle, everything would become so

much worse. If Harry refused, the implications were that all of the deaths and tortures and crimes to come would be blood that rested to some degree on his hands and his hands alone. The price of saying a most emphatic no might be higher than he could stomach as time, and the war to come, marched ever on. Given how his mind already punished him on a nightly basis for his acts in the past, he could only guess at how much worse it could be when the body count rose daily. Though he had come close to losing Remus before, if it happened for real as a consequence of his rejection to Riddle, he was unsure that he would be able to survive his own mind's retribution.

This was a classical damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-do-not situation, and he could find no solution. He knew he would spend hours with Remus, Edgar, and the others in the days to come, exploring meanings and implications, and they always argued well. Ultimately, however, it was Harry that Riddle wanted, and it was Harry that would have to say yea or nay – not the people that gave him advice, not the people that offered him support. It would always be he alone in the end, and it would be Harry more than any other that lived with the consequences of that decision.

The easy grace and soothing tones that Riddle had used left Harry curious about his foe's childhood. He had seen bits and pieces in Dumbledore's memories, but those were fragments and only hints of what the boy had been. His knowledge even at the age of sixteen had been nothing short of phenomenal, and his knowledge of magic, Harry suspected, exceeded what Harry knew at the same age. While he thought Hermione's zeal and quest for knowledge might mirror that of an imaginary younger Riddle, the idea was disconcerting to contemplate for long.

Riddle was a loner in many respects and was social only when it served his purposes. He was reputed to be in the library constantly, always studying something, if not making connections to people of status. Hermione was also always in the library studying, but she came to Harry with friendly language and happy tones on a quest to further that knowledge. Yet there was no denying that Harry had status, whether good or bad. What was more, Hermione seemed to hide her relationship with Ginny's brother for no apparent reason that Harry could discern.

Riddle had been capable of astounding feats of magic, and Harry had observed Hermione doing some things he was unsure he could have done without studying for a bit. Harry had a far richer knowledge of the new and improved theory of magic, one he knew surpassed either Hermione's or Riddle's at this age, but at the same time, his dedicated training had been funnelled along narrow channels, whereas both Hermione and Riddle were focused on learning everything. It was also unclear whether the Riddle of today knew the theory of magic as Harry did, or if that expected advantage was only extant in his mind. Regardless, he had given Hermione enough hints about how magic really worked that it was only a matter of time before the girl would know what he knew. Given her probable higher innate intelligence and ambition, he was almost certain that twenty years down the line Hermione would be better at all aspects of magic than he was, though she might not be as good of a duellist.

Harry's introspection was cut short when he heard mewling and shuffling feet from the stairwell behind him. Harry knew that he would be unable to truly justify coming out here on the way back to his room, but he hoped he could talk his way out of any immediate consequence.

Two cats shot across the roof of the Astronomy Tower towards him, each glowing rather vibrantly to his vision. Harry was amused to see them stop near his feet, their eyes reflecting the moonlight back at him.

"Who's there, then?" called a rough female voice. He looked up to see an older woman coming out of the stairwell, and he immediately knew, based on her magic levels, that she was no more than a Squib – that, or she was magically drained to beyond exhaustion. "Mr Tibbles? Mr Paws? Who have you caught?"

One of the cats ran back to the woman, who steadily walked toward Harry, her right hand deep in a hand-bag slung over her shoulder, the left one snapping fingers lightly. As she drew close enough for Harry to see her face clearly, she stopped abruptly and placed her left hand on her throat. "Harry Potter!" she cried softly.

Harry felt that the woman was a negligible threat, and her recognition of him was unsurprising given recent events and history in general. The only odd behaviour was her right hand firmly ensconced in the hand-bag, but there were any number of plausible reasons for that. He decided on playing it easy for the time being. "Yes?"

She continued to look at him, what little colour he could see in the weak light rapidly fading to near-ghost quality. With a visible shake, she seemed to come back to her senses somewhat. "I'm sorry, Harry," she said quietly. "I knew you were here, at Hogwarts, but didn't expect to see you tonight."

She spoke with a familiarity that surprised him, for he had no recollection of this woman. Her tone was far from that of the usual adult assuming the liberty to use his first name. It bespoke of personal experience and intimate knowledge. "Do I know you?"

"Oh! You wouldn't remember!" She looked flustered for a moment before one of her cats – whether it was Mr Tibbles or Mr Paws was unclear to him – began purring and rubbing twixt her legs in a sinuous motion, half-snake, half-smoke. "I was a last-resort minder for you, when those . . . those relatives of yours needed someone in a pinch."

Harry could tell she was incredibly uncomfortable after revealing such information, but it made little impression on his part. There were no memories of this woman or her cats clamouring for his attention – but then, he usually only remembered events before the age of seven in fragments and unsettling dreams. He had spent years learning to accept the reality of life, and even though he would always be influenced by those events, he had learned the hardest lesson in the end. "It wasn't your fault. You needn't feel bad about it."

She seemed to sag in relief at his words, but he was unsure as to why. "That's very kind of you, Harry. I'm Arabella Figg," she said while she extended one hand, "and I'm sorry for you, anyway."

Harry shook her hand calmly, but her behaviour was something he found increasingly odd. "Why should you feel any responsibility for it?"

“Well, Albus did ask me to move to Little Whinging so I could keep an eye out for you,” she said as though it was knowledge he would have possessed long since. Harry’s insides felt like ice, and he was amazed that he was standing so still. When his confusion registered on her, she visibly deflated. “I told him I was going on holiday, but he didn’t think anyone would need to fill in.”

“I see,” he finally ground out, though the enunciation was off since his lips were not fully compliant. “No, Professor Dumbledore and I still are catching up, you see.” Harry thought that was a safe statement and probably would be for as long as they were both among the living. “But I’m sure he’ll be more than delighted to tell me the details, Ms Figg.” He had demanded to know about Riddle, but the riddle was on him, for he should have demanded to know about himself first, apparently.

“Oh, it’s Mrs Figg, Harry, and I’m sure he’ll tell you anything you want to ask him.” She clucked her tongue briefly. “He was ever so devastated when he found out what happened. Why, just between you and me, Minerva said that it took a physical toll on him. I saw it, too. He moved rather stiffly for a while after we all thought you lost. I was a wreck myself for months.”

Harry found himself nodding along, not fully paying attention to what she was saying yet still keeping a record of her words in the back of his brain for later consideration. Dumbledore had set her to monitor him, yet either she was incompetent or Dumbledore had overlooked whatever she was telling him. Harry was puzzled as to what the game was here: was it one of Dumbledore having an agenda, as Remus feared, or was it simply more of the same wilful ignorance that let the Slytherin students abuse whom they pleased in the pious hope that they might choose to reform? Neither path was encouraging, though it was conceivable that there were other explanations as well. Yet, here was one of the people directly involved, and she must know more of the matter than she had revealed thus far. “Surely,” Harry faux-coughed briefly to try to get his voice into a more normal tone, “surely, Mrs Figg, it wasn’t that much of a surprise? After all, if you



were watching out for me, then you must have told him that things weren't well?"

She stooped to scoop up her cat, which Harry ignored, focusing more on her frown and the set of her eyes. There were clues here if he could find them. "Oh, I told him, all right, I told him those people were horrid to talk to. I never saw them do anything, no, but I told him they were rude and didn't seem to care for you." He was surprised at the vehemence she expressed. "By the time you were, oh, maybe four or so, I stopped saying much about it. I wasn't allowed to see you often, and you always seemed well enough from a distance. My comments didn't seem to change a thing, and it just made me ever so upset." She paused to scratch under the cat's chin and around the scent glands on its face. "Albus would stop by from time to time, just to chat or check up on you himself, but he never indicated there was anything wrong at the Dursleys'. I think that's why it hit him so hard, Harry, since he was there and never saw it coming."

Harry made a non-committal humming sound as he considered her words. The headmaster had checked up on him at some level yet found nothing wrong, nothing out of place with the living arrangements, with the food arrangements, with anything. Just another normal Muggle family, perhaps, to the man's investigative efforts, regardless of where the truth might lie.

"Well, Harry, it's nice to see you again," Mrs Figg continued on, oblivious to the struggle Harry found within himself. "But it is after hours, and you're supposed to be with Madam Pomfrey, aren't you?"

Harry shook himself slightly to get his mind back on task. "I was released," he offered quietly. "I stopped up here on my way back to enjoy the night air."

"Oh." Mrs Figg placed her cat back on the ground and finally took her right hand out of her bag, empty. "I'll let it go this time, Harry, but you need to go to your room now. It's after curfew."

Harry said nothing and only picked up his materials as he nodded his acceptance. True, he had escaped any consequences for being out

of bounds after hours, but he had also been given another issue to puzzle over. Riddle and Dumbledore, two different problems with two different sets of actions behind them painting two very different, yet somehow similar, pictures.

“Ever since I got here,” Mrs Figg commented as she joined him in leaving the tower, “my poor cats have been all over the place. It’s making me batty, I think. If they aren’t chasing that poor Mrs Norris, I can never find them until they’ve cornered some poor animal. Once they even scared a first-year.” Harry ignored her absent tsk’ing as they descended back into the cold corridors in the castle. “Good night, Harry,” she called out as she moved off, chasing after her cats, which had shot around the corner.

Harry was disturbed by the information he had received from such an unwitting source. On the one hand, she had no reason to be deceitful or guileful. On the other, there was a set of implications from her casual commentary that left him with a new headache to add on to all the old ones.

When he entered his suite of rooms, he noticed immediately that Cyril’s door was shut. The fire was gone, and the common area was cool. Everything was in deep shadow, the only source of light one faintly burning torch by the door itself. With the realisation that there would be no talking to Cyril tonight, Harry sighed. His fate was clear, and that was an attempt to re-visit Morpheus, even though he knew it would be nearly futile.

Locating a bit of parchment and a quill in his room, he left a note for Cyril prominently placed on the small table by the fire, between the winged-back chairs.

Cyril –

Please wake me if I’m not up before you leave. I need to discuss yesterday’s events with you.

– HJP

Harry neglected to bring up the lights in his own room or to study the mirror that Cyril wanted him to contemplate. After the dreams and conversations already experienced during the evening, there could be nothing gained by examination of a reflection that had nothing apposite to tell him.

Ginny's question swirled in and out of his thoughts about Dumbledore, Remus, Riddle, and Nicolas. You don't really let yourself think about it, do you? Of course he thought about it, although he preferred to delay the thinking as much as possible. Thinking never changed the outcome of the past; rather, it only helped you try to avoid the same mistake again. Usually, he found that the mistakes made were glaring and needed little reflection to identify. Deep contemplation, which was what she was probably asking after, was something he wanted nothing to do with.

As far as he was concerned, he was miles away from the same place the other students were in, let alone the staff. They were not locked in a battle of life-and-death, or if they were, the scale was so small compared to the one he was forced into as to be almost meaningless. There was no benefit to thinking about his past, other than accepting a date with a riddle that – until recently, apparently – wanted him dead in as abrupt a manner as possible.

Thinking had failed to save anyone Harry cared for, and it was unlikely to save him should he face off with Riddle tomorrow. He had to train harder, that was clear. The orb that Riddle had created was magic beyond anything he had previously considered. In fact, the mere notion that the orb worked over the time and distance involved was nothing short of fear-inducing. Time and space were critical components in magic, and Harry would have sworn – prior to the previous morning – that such a feat was impossible if the creator were more than a hundred feet from the creation. That Riddle had casually violated a fundamental premise of the new theory of magic that Remus had developed was more than enough to induce new dimensions of paranoia. Or else Riddle had easy and untraceable access to Hogwarts, which was just as strong a motivator for a healthy paranoia.

Perhaps he could discuss it with the headmaster in the more sane morning hours, assuming that the man had recovered and that Dumbledore had some open and frank answers for the questions surrounding what Mrs Figg had told him. The idea that a man so generally revered had mis-stepped profoundly with the Slytherin students was hard enough to accept. The further unsupported implication that the man had known of Harry's early childhood and done nothing about it was beyond the pale. Should that situation be true, Harry was uncertain he could function in any type of working relationship to the headmaster.

You don't really let yourself think about it, do you? Harry had to admit that he really did try to avoid thinking about it as much as he could. He avoided talking about it, thinking about it, or letting any emotions about it creep into his consciousness. What happened on any given yesterday was only interesting in whether he was still functioning and on track today. The only person he was willing to explore it with was Remus, and it had always been only Remus. While Remus was ready to listen and offer support as needed, their different perspectives on life made it hard to reach any semblance of balance. It was far easier to ignore it, than to contemplate it, than to reflect about it.

The grey light of the false dawn was illumining his window by the time the door opened and Cyril looked in. Harry sat up, saying nothing, his body telling him nothing so much as the fact that he was drained. Physically, emotionally, and magically, he was drained, his brain was tired, and the circular thoughts had led him nowhere except to a level of irritation with the girl in the hospital wing who had inadvertently denied him any semblance of Morpheus' embrace.

Cyril backed out of the room, and Harry followed him. While Harry sank into a chair silently, he watched Cyril reignite the fire and light all the torches up to a faint level of brightness, the amalgamated torchlight never overpowering the now roaring fire.

"I heard from Remus yester eve, Harry." Cyril's voice was soft, muted as the waxing morning light. "Before we discuss that, which I assume is what you wish to talk to me about, I need to explain what happened while you were . . . occupied."

Harry nodded along as Cyril spoke, both in agreement to what he personally wanted to talk about and to what Cyril wanted to talk about. Given that Umbridge had called in the Aurors, he was sure some trumped-up accusation would be levelled along with some new Ministry-backed action aimed to thwart Harry or his objectives in some manner.

“I suppose we can skip the lack of logic and arrive at the end. You are not allowed to have personal correspondence that does not go through me.” Cyril shook his head slightly, and Harry could tell it was disgust at the ‘security’ measure that was to be implemented. “You are subject to random searches by me or the Headmaster to be sure you are carrying nothing Dark. You are, again, banned from extracurricular student activities, including clubs and the like, but now for the entire time you are here. And finally, you are hereby warned that any further damage to the school or injury to other students may result in your immediate expulsion.”

Harry found himself laughing slightly at Cyril’s expression. “That’s all Umbridge asked for?”

“No,” Cyril replied immediately. “She wanted you in Azkaban, but I need not get into jurisdictions with you. Then she wanted you expelled but lacked any evidence for yesterday being an act of your design. Sadly, she did succeed in having Fudge recalled from his holiday. Believe me, Harry,” Cyril said with obvious displeasure, “she very much wanted your skin for a rug in her office, and I think Fudge would be happy to give it to her could he but find a pretext.”

“They can stand in queue, then,” Harry offered with a faint smirk. “So the Aurors have all left?”

“Partially. Hogwarts Staff have been notified that the Ministry may conduct random Auror sweeps to ensure ‘the safety of the student body.’ I am unclear why Fudge is so against you, Harry.” Cyril paused to give Harry a very clear invitation to explain the irritation.

“Honestly, Cyril, I couldn’t tell you. I know I’ve been a public sore spot for him since getting here and everything that happened with

those purebloods.” Harry shrugged. “We know he takes money from an interesting subset of purebloods, we know he supports their agendas, what we don’t know is why. But if I had to guess, that’s the source of the problem.”

Cyril shook his head briefly. “So Albus said as well, and I will tell you what I told him. There must be more to it than that.”

“Well, they certainly can’t pin some of the slow legal reforms on us, assuming they’ve even noticed. If Fudge knew even half of what I’ve really been doing these past few years, I’d be in Azkaban, my limited Mage status be damned.”

“Perhaps, Harry, perhaps,” Cyril replied, but the disquiet of his manner left Harry confused as to what his Mentor might be worried about. “I am concerned at your lack of concern for this situation, among others.”

“What? You want me to be worked up over what Fudge wants?” Harry laughed bitterly. “I’m not about to worry about that fool. I’ve much more serious things to worry about if the mood strikes me.”

“So you worry about our Riddle, but not much else?” Cyril seemed intent on extracting some particular thought from Harry.

“Did you follow the implied repercussions of my answer? Riddle is part of it, but not all.”

“I understood it quite well, Harry,” Cyril said, and he could almost feel the irritation from his Mentor. “What you seem to fail to comprehend is the point I’m making. I’m aware that you fancy yourself very familiar with legal theory, so I ask you this: do you recall reading about *Dahlia, Ltd. v. Yvonne*, a case from earlier this century? It was widely referred to as the ‘Act of God’ defence.”

Harry had to pause and peruse his memories to be sure, but with a common label such as that, he was nearly certain he had never read about the precedent. “No,” he said slowly, “I don’t think I have.”

“Very well, let me give you my recollection of the events as they were reported.” Cyril moved to stand in front of the fire, his right hand covering his eyes. Harry was familiar with this mannerism, since he had seen Cyril do the same when reminiscing with Dumbledore from time to time. “Madam Yvonne was sued over her product, buns I think, and lost the case because the buns were made with an acid. Undeterred, however, she appealed the ruling to the Court of Appeals. Losing there, she eventually reached the House of Lords for final determination. The barrister representing the Madam, a Mr David I believe, stood up to the Lords and postulated that his client was not liable for damages accrued during the appeals process because they had, in fact, appealed to the highest court in the land.”

When Cyril looked at Harry to see if he was listening, Harry knew his own confusion was apparent. “Err, he argued that she wasn’t financially responsible for their appeals because they appealed the decision? That’s . . . barmy.”

“Indeed, Harry,” Cyril said with a faint smile. “The argument was that since the facts were capable of being disputed and that appeals were filed and accepted, surely there was no way for the client to anticipate losing all of her legal battles. An ‘Act of God’ is generally defined as something which no reasonable man could have expected. Ultimately, or so the claim was postulated, if the facts had to be appealed to the House of Lords, then surely the majority vote for the Lords’ decision or interpretation of the law was on par with a random event, in that no one could accurately predict a judgment from such a diverse group.”

Harry scratched absently at his ear for a moment. “Okay, that’s stupid, but I get it. Barrister David was suggesting that since the outcome was random, it was on par to an Act of God, and thus by legal codex, they were not responsible for damages, is that it? You can’t be liable for that which no reasonable man can foresee?”

“Very good,” Cyril said as he returned to his seat. “That is exactly the argument. Would you care to speculate on how the Lords viewed this rather new and exciting theory for defence?”

Harry had to stop and think about it, as he knew that sometimes the House of Lords would go out of its way to make a point, and sometimes – no matter how illogical – they were bound by precedent and poorly-structured laws to make strange judgments. It was the chief drawback to a common law system, in that insane results might be enforced far beyond the context they were first considered in during centuries prior. “I would believe them to be rather unfavourable to it, but the argument is based on late Parliamentary law, so it’s hard to say.”

“From what I read about it, Harry, the Lords accused the barrister of being ill, or perhaps mentally deficient, but commanded him to come back another day and try again. His theory was rather quickly defenestrated.” Cyril stopped talking, but Harry knew from the body language that the point was not made yet.

“And?”

“And it was a novel attempt to get around the reality of the situation, but ultimately doomed to failure. Mr David bypassed the context of the original complaint and focused only on the facts and legal technicalities, which were patently absurd when considered as a whole.” Cyril still had that expectant look on his face, and Harry felt that he was missing the point somehow.

Harry decided to approach the problem cautiously, hoping to prise some clue for the direction of his Mentor’s thinking out of the man. “That’s similar to Edgar’s complaint, that facts tend to be irrelevant, and only perception matters.”

“So I have heard,” Cyril said quietly. “The problem as I see it, Harry, lies in your Weltanschauung. You treat the world outside of your direct actions as Mr David proposed – that is, if you are not personally controlling something, it’s an Act of God. I’m telling you that’s just as silly as you found Mr David’s argument, and you need to stop doing it. As Einstein once said, ‘we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.’ You must change your thinking, Harry, before everything is too far out of control, for you have made far too many problems lately.”



The point was indirect, for the most part, but the point was made. Harry understood precisely what his Mentor was telling him, and to a certain extent, he even had to agree. The group at home had come up with a plan to rapidly neutralise Hogwarts, while fixing many of the little problems they had studied.

His number one priority in coming to Hogwarts was to force Dumbledore to meet their demands and to obtain access to the man's knowledge. His second priority was neutralising all threats, with the end objective to have Snape evicted from the castle. Those two plans had worked, more or less, although the repercussions were still rolling. The first piece that had failed was winning the favour of the student body, which he had come close to achieving with the elimination of critical problem cases and neutering Snape, but those efforts were for naught thanks to the ambush outside of the headmaster's office. The second failure has been a second casualty of the first, for he found it nearly impossible to begin securing the connections he needed to make with strategic people. Further unexpected complications came in the form of the multiple Horcrux issue, the DADA hag, the full prophecy details, and the communiqué from Riddle.

"Right, right, I get it. Goes back to the mirror and all. I'll do what I can."

"No, Harry," Cyril sharply retorted, "you will do more than that. Every time you have been presented with an opportunity for new thinking, you have shunned it. Take Miss Granger, for example. She has a most sharp mind, and you avoid her rather than take advantage of the opportunity."

Harry shuddered at the idea of spending long periods of time with Hermione. The amount of explaining he would have to do was enough to make the idea sickening. Cyril would not care about such a reaction, but Harry had valid reasons for discouraging the idea as well. "I'm having second thoughts about Ginny, and you want me to add to it? You know how closely Riddle is going to monitor whom I

associate with. Look at what happened yesterday. You want me to volunteer them without telling them the price?"

Cyril leaned over the table and met Harry's eyes from a very short distance. "Yes. You need these people. You need people you trust, who can guard your back, who can help you when you're stuck. No person is an island, Harry, you know this."

"You want me to use them, then? And I can't even tell them all of the reasons why. I don't like it, let alone the risk it places them in."

"Harry," Cyril said quite shortly, "how do you make an omelette?"

"No!" Harry stood up and glared back at his Mentor, surprised at the anger in his own voice. "I'm not following Dumbledore's school of thought!"

Cyril made a broad, sweeping gesture at the space about them. "And yet, you chose to come here to learn Dumbledore's school of thought."

"Not like that!" Harry had to consciously try not to shout. "I'm not using people for my own secret games!"

"But you are," Cyril insisted. "Every moment you are here with no one really knowing why, you place them at considerable risk. Every game you play with Edgar in the Wizengamot is the same 'using people' that you seem to disagree with. So what is the principle involved? What are you really objecting to?"

"I'm objecting to manipulating innocents!" Harry knew where his moral line was drawn and failed to see why Cyril was yanking his chain. "People in the Wizengamot know what they're in for. They decided to be there. The Death Eaters and their sympathisers also know what they signed up for and the risks they took. The students that are still here are for the most part naïve and unaware!"

"And you feel that it is appropriate to hide a bomb amongst them?" Cyril's voice was full of contempt, which made Harry even angrier.

“No!” Harry had to stop and think, so he held up his hands. “Just stop for a moment!” Cyril stood facing Harry, his Mentor’s face full of irritation and something that was hard to place, but it seemed like disgust. Taking a deep breath, Harry tried again. “I’m not a bomb. That analogy doesn’t work. This place is heavily protected, and we’ve removed the direct threats inside the walls.”

Cyril sat down calmly, his face relaxing into a more neutral expression. “Very good, Harry. We have established that the use of innocents is not appropriate. We have established that many chose their sides or careers with their eyes open and know the risks they are taking. That does not translate to everyone, but then you don’t generally consider the ‘little people’ in your plans. That, too, must change. For now, however, where exactly is the line drawn? Did you tell Miss Weasley the full stakes, or not?”

Harry shook his head. “No, I didn’t. That and the realisation I had about her exposure to danger are giving me second thoughts.”

Cyril appeared nothing so much as sad as Harry regarded him. “It’s far too late for that, Harry. By now, he will know whom you sit with in classes, whom you talk to, and probably that you have been training her. He will likely know everything that has happened since you got on the train at Kings Cross. Best you keep training her so she can defend herself, because I can assure you, she is on his list.”

Harry sat back down and put his head in his hands. “You’re sure? And what of the others?”

Cyril’s voice was soft, a sharp contrast to the argument they had been having moments before. “Almost certainly, Harry, anyone friendly to you is on the list. I would encourage you to take advantage of what you have and plan accordingly, or else you won’t have the option later. I will state again, you should use the gifts of Miss Granger while you can.”

“I don’t trust her. I’ve also realised that she’s similar to Riddle in several ways.”

“Lad,” Cyril said quietly, “we all have similarities to that jackal. Only you can decide to trust her, so put some time in and find out the truth.”

Reluctantly, Harry nodded. As he looked back at his Mentor, he registered fully the fact that Cyril was so calm. “You’re proving a point, aren’t you?”

“Slowly, perhaps. Go off to breakfast and class, Harry. Remember, accept nothing from an owl. In fact, if one approaches you, Transfigure it into something creative and give it to Umbridge, why don’t you?”

“Breakfast won’t even start to be served for another twenty minutes, Cyril. And we haven’t talked about yesterday, either.”

“You are not ready to talk about yesterday, Harry, despite your desire to. But you do need to get dressed, gather your supplies, and think of what things Umbridge might like to receive, don’t you?” Harry watched as his Mentor nodded briefly before disappearing through their portrait-door, ideas for what might terrify Umbridge the most already floating through his head. He still had to make use of her Vampire fears, but that needed more time to set up than he had at the moment.

With a sigh, Harry went through his morning ritual of showering, basic hygiene, gathering supplies, and mentally preparing for a day in crowds – or at least, crowds to him. Arguing with Cyril was difficult because Harry felt he typically came out on the losing side in the end. By the time he arrived at the Great Hall, the doors were open, and it was still several minutes before the elves would begin serving breakfast, leaving the Great Hall deserted. Cyril’s casual encouragement to reward Umbridge was amusing, but not particularly surprising. He had discovered that his Mentor had a mind that veered toward revenge in as many ways as possible when outright dismemberment was not an option. There had been many references to the woman harassing his Mentor over Harry since he had arrived, and Cyril’s encouragement must be a sign that he was tired of it.

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The problem, as Harry saw it, was that doing something just to Umbridge would invariably point the finger of suspicion at him in some manner. If he did something to all of the staff, however, then it would be more likely deflected onto the Weasley twins. With that thought in mind, Harry left his bag near his usual seat at the Gryffindor table and studied the place where the staff habitually sat. Unlike the bench seats the students enjoyed, the staff had the perk of individual seats, with rather plush-looking cushions and carved armrests. Furthermore, they had rather more elaborate utensils and plates, not to mention glasses. The simplest path would be to do a delayed Transfiguration on each cushion, but he was still less than fully recovered from the previous day's events. It would have to be something small in each case, and then he would need a trigger. To be properly attributed to the twins, that implied tying the trigger to them in some manner. Of course, the secondary way to look at it was to have each cushion charmed to affect the user in some manner, assuming firm contact was made between the cushion and the staff member.

Hagrid was easy. Harry just set the target to have all the hair on his body grow approximately five feet longer. Flitwick was set to float to within an armspan of the ceiling, while McGonagall got the first Transfiguration – a lioness. Not small, but not hard either, given her natural talents. He knew her Animagus form and thought she might enjoy a bit of romping as a rather larger feline. As Harry walked along behind the chairs, he randomly began applying different bits of magic, such as Madam Hooch getting a model Firebolt broom that would attempt to curl her hair continuously, and Madam Pomfrey's cushion turning into a wood plaque proclaiming 'Voted Best Bedside Manner.' Trelawney's cushion was set to change into an ostrich egg, while Umbridge's was set to become a hedgehog.

Satisfied that the magic was all set, Harry went back to his seat and thought about how to trigger the effects. All he needed to do was cast the trigger charm anywhere in the room, and they would activate. He would have to keep his eyes open for the right moment, safely transferring the blame to the twins while obtaining the maximum

results for staff affected. Pulling out his David Weber book, Harry opted to spend the rest of his time waiting for breakfast reading. Bahzell was a bit dense at times, but his heart was in the right place.

By the time the Neville arrived, who was the first person to sit near him, Harry had given up trying to read and was surreptitiously studying the glances sent his way from those already in the Great Hall by looking above the open pages. Neville dropped down into a seat across from Harry with a pleasant nod, and Harry was happy to see that his friend showed no lingering effects from the previous day's fun. "Released from jail, then?" he asked with his usual sarcasm.

Neville smiled and shrugged, reaching for the pot of tea. "Yeah. Ginny's off collecting her brothers, though she said something about re-education. You look a bit better."

Harry rolled his shoulders, increasingly uncomfortable with all of the stares that were being directed at both Neville and him. Cyril's comments about Riddle knowing whom Harry was friendly with surfaced briefly before Harry crushed them down. "Wouldn't be hard, from what I heard," Harry replied. "Thanks for trying to help, but I'm not sure that I would recommend doing it again."

Neville frowned a bit before taking a stack of fried eggs, bacon, and fry-soaked soda bread onto his plate. "My choice, isn't it?"

"Sure," Harry replied. "It's your choice to step in front of a train, too, and I can't recommend that for you, either."

"Oh?" Neville looked up and watched Harry for a moment. "So there are people you would recommend that for?"

"Neville," Harry said with his feral smile, "there are people in this world I would tie to the tracks and then drive the locomotive. Surely that's pretty obvious by now, isn't it?"

Neville flushed slightly but said nothing in response. Harry felt bad for making Neville embarrassed, if that was what his friend was

experiencing, but he wanted to start redressing Cyril's comments about keeping his friends ignorant.

"Neville, I'm not trying to make fun of you. Look, you know being around me is dangerous, right?"

Neville looked at Harry for a moment before nodding slowly.

"Then you can understand that I'm trying to give you fair warning. Being around me can get you hurt for reasons you might not even know."

Neville methodically cut up some of his eggs, smearing the residue with the soda bread, which Harry took to be a way to have time for concentration. Harry had a bit of toast and bacon left from his own breakfast, but he was no longer particularly hungry. He was willing to wait his friend out.

"Harry," Neville said after a few bites, "getting out of bed can get you hurt, too. You're not trying to get us hurt, are you?"

Harry shook his head, watching as Neville took another bite of his breakfast. When he had finished chewing, Neville spoke again.

"Then it's not your fault, is it?"

Harry shook his head again but held up one hand to forestall Neville from continuing. "No, it's not my fault, as I'm not going to attack you – well, not unless you warrant it. But the point is, these people don't care. They aren't going to use a Tickling Hex on you. They're going straight for Crucio or worse. You can choose to be around me, sure, but do you understand what it is that you're choosing? Will you be able to defend yourself? From what I've seen of most students here, no student is capable of duelling with the people that are after me."

Neville nodded in turn as he continued to work his way through his breakfast. It was several moments before he spoke again. "If you're worried about that, Harry, then maybe you should train people how to duel."

Harry laughed shortly. "Been talking to Ginny, much?"

Neville shook his head. "Not on this. It's kind of obvious, isn't it?"

Harry said nothing, but he started pushing the remainder of his breakfast around the plate. Cyril and Neville were in agreement on this, and Ginny for all intents and purposes had been nothing less than shouting it at him. Neville he could trust, but the question was whether his new friend had a fighting instinct. Basic duelling was something anyone could learn, but it was insufficient for the situations Harry found himself in. If you were not born with the spark, from what he could tell, you would never have more than an infinitesimal chance in a fight to the death with someone that did.

As he contemplated Neville's words, Hermione and the Weasley troupe arrived, Ginny giving him a weak smile that he could tell was quite forced. Her worries over their midnight conversation were probably eating at her, and after Cyril's chat, he was reluctantly forced to agree with his Mentor. For Ginny, at least, it was too late to turn back now.

As she sat next to him and dropped her bag to the floor, Harry whispered quietly to her. "I talked it over with Cyril. You and I will keep training, assuming you're willing to risk your life over it."

When Ginny looked up at him, her smile was no longer obviously forced, but neither was it warm and happy. It was the smile of someone who had obtained what they wanted but doubted whether they really wanted it after all, so they were trying to be polite to mask their ambiguous mental state.

"How are you, Harry?" Hermione's chipper voice at that hour was out of place with Harry's own feelings on the matter, but he smiled faintly anyway.

"Just peachy, Hermione."



“Well, at least you’re out of the hospital wing, right?” George asked brightly.

“That’s always a good thing,” Ginny observed. “We’re used to being in there from time to time after a hard Quidditch game or the random practice where someone,” she glared at her brothers, “gets a bit carried away.”

“Now, Gin-Gin,” Fred offered cautiously, “it was only that one time, and Oliver set us on the straight and narrow, didn’t he?”

George was visibly wincing, which made Harry curious, but Ron’s smirk was enough to make it clear that the twins had been given a physical lecture rather than a verbal one. “How long did it take for Pomfrey to get those splinters out, George?” Ron asked in an overly casual voice. Harry was surprised that he was participating in the conversation, but it was a small step, and life was usually made up of them.

“Speaking of which,” Fred said as though Ron had never said anything, “I’ve something for you, Harry.” The redhead stuck out a tri-folded piece of parchment, sealed with wax, which had obviously been carried by an owl. It had no aura, so there was no danger from the note. As Harry plucked it out of Fred’s outstretched hand, he noticed the elegant handwriting on one side.

Mr Harry Potter

Gryffindor Temporarily

Hogwarts

Harry flipped the sealed parchment over in his hands a few times, ignoring the wax imprinting across the folded flap. It was as non-magical as anything he had ever seen in the magical world, so there was no real danger in opening it. Most of the silent faces around him told him that they were curious, but after the prior morning’s events, they would be just as happy if he never opened it near them. When Ginny nudged his side with an expectant look at the parchment, he

felt that he might as well get it over with. Breaking the wax with one finger, he carefully unfolded the parchment so that no one else could read it and saw a rather short note in the middle of the page.

Mr Potter –

I love my daughter but find that at times she fails to understand who taught whom. Surely you don't think that I need your cooperation to deliver my message, now do you?

I do so hope you enjoy your weekend. I shall very much enjoy mine.

Cordially,

Molly P. Weasley

The Burrow

Quickly refolding it, he kept it firmly held in one hand. Ginny was all but pouting at him, whereas Fred and George looked . . . decidedly nervous. "Err, that was quick?" Fred asked hopefully.

"Of course it was. She was just telling me to enjoy my time here, boys. She's obviously concerned over how you've been treating me." Harry enjoyed the looks of disbelief spreading over the Weasleys. "Oh, and she said she was looking forward to the weekend at home. Probably all the peace and quiet with you lot stuck here."

As they continued to gape at him, Harry just smiled blandly and poured himself another cup of tea. He was curious how long it would take for the challenge to come out.

"You're having us on!" Fred said after a long moment of silence. "Prove it!"

Harry smirked and threw the letter on the table. When Ginny scooped it up faster than anyone could blink, Harry started laughing softly. She went beet-red as she read it and then threw it on the table. "I can't believe her!"

George picked it up and read it to everyone quietly, making Hermione laugh softly as she pointed to all of them. "None of you even know your own mum. This is priceless!"

George sullenly looked back at Harry. "I don't agree with your interpretation. Sounds like she's going to deliver her response this weekend." He pushed the parchment back towards Harry but sighed deeply. "But I have to admit, it does kind of sound like what you said."

Fred stood up, clearly irritated. "That's not right—"

All conversations in the Great Hall came to an abrupt halt as Harry activated the magic on the Staff chairs. Umbridge was screeching, while Hooch was batting the broomstick away from her face. Hagrid was laughing outright, while Flitwick immediately modified the charm and began flittering about the hall. It took almost two heartbeats before McGonagall let out a loud roar and leapt over the head table. She stalked straight up to Fred, who was standing with a deep red flush on his face, and she pushed him onto the ground. With one paw on his chest, she growled briefly before returning to her human form as Harry cast the second trigger, cancelling all of the spells. Flitwick easily caught himself, which saved Harry from having to catch him, and the small man settled back onto his seat, clapping excitedly.

McGonagall glared at both twins, ignoring the shouts of outrage from some of her staff, as she pointed out the doors to the Great Hall. "Fred! George! My office, now!"

When Ginny hissed in his ear, he was unsurprised. "That was your doing!"

Harry gave her the blandest smile he could before he gathered his stuff and headed off to class. Umbridge was still shouting incoherently, while Madam Pomfrey was apparently threatening to Stun her if she refused to sit still for an examination.

When Harry arrived in the corridor to the Charms and Transfiguration classrooms, he found McGonagall standing by her room. As soon as

their eyes met, she pointed imperiously to the floor directly in front of her. As he walked to her, he put on his imperturbable mask.

“Yes, Professor?” He deliberately avoided any attempt at overt innocence, adopting instead a casual, every-day tone.

“Mr Potter, drop the façade. You and I both know you did that this morning, but more the pity for you, so do the Weasley boys. Would you care to explain why you did this? That woman was hard enough to deal with yesterday.”

Harry shrugged lightly. “I do understand the position you’re in, Professor, but please understand mine as well. I did exactly what my Mentor asked me to do this morning – well, except for setting up the twins for it.”

“And if I were to ask Cyril if he told you to do exactly that, would he agree?”

Harry gave her a wan smile. “Well, to Umbridge, yeah. The rest of it was all misdirection.”

Her stern gaze was rather impressive but less so than her niece’s honed version of the McGonagall stare. “You and your Mentor are making my job most difficult, Mr Potter.” She gave a long sigh, then smiled wanly at him. “I suppose I should expect no less considering that Remus and Sirius are involved in this somehow. I’m asking you, however, to please desist for a while. The Weasleys get into enough trouble on their own. They need no assistance from you.”

Harry smiled back at her. “No problem. And for the record, feel free to expel me if you feel like it. It wouldn’t be any bother.”

“Would you leave if I did?” He was uncertain, but it sounded faintly as though the professor had hope in her voice.

“Eventually.” Harry adopted his most innocent look, knowing how absurd it would be. “It’s more fun to play like Peeves, though.”

“Please, no,” she said quickly. “He’s been almost uncontrollable these past few years. I think the Weasleys have inspired him, assuming they haven’t been supplying him.”

Harry laughed at the idea, amused to think of the twins sneaking out to give Peeves new ammunition for a campaign of pranks and mock terror. “No worries, Professor,” Harry said after a moment, “I have it on good authority that Peeves is now afraid to stick around, lest Myrtle catch him.”

“Is that why he’s been so scarce?” McGonagall’s smile became slightly wider. “I shall have to find Myrtle and thank her.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t recommend that, Professor. She might get upset if she thinks you’re trying to get her out of the way.”

McGonagall looked him over closely, though Harry was unsure what she was looking for exactly. “Very well, Mr Potter. For your actions this morning, I sentence you to the fate the twins dole out for you. Please try to refrain from further disrupting things, though, would you?”

After Harry nodded, while not actually agreeing to anything, she walked into her classroom, and Harry had to chuckle as he walked into Flitwick’s room and thought of the twins with their ‘we’ll get you yet’ efforts. While in many respects, it was only a matter of time before they learned how to catch him unawares, he was looking forward to any attempts on their part to escalate the campaign. It was surprising how their efforts so far had been rather simple, yet he could see there was a distinct elevation of seriousness from one attempt to the next, which implied that things should get interesting in another two or three tries. He would need to find some way to deflect as many of their forthcoming efforts as possible on Umbridge, however.

By the time the lunch hour had arrived, Harry would have been happy to be almost anyone else. The twins had gone out of their way to threaten him with all kinds of dire consequences during the shuffle between Charms and Transfiguration, and each professor had forced

him to sit at the very front of the class, where they could 'keep an eye on him' as it were. No one had been allowed to sit with him, which bothered him not at all, but the continuous feeling of eyes focused on the back of his head kept his paranoia stoked.

Harry deliberately waited behind while everyone else filed out for the Great Hall and lunch, looking toward Professor McGonagall as the room emptied. As the last student left, she regarded him coolly. "Yes, Mr Potter?"

"How's the headmaster?" he asked quietly. "I need to chat with him."

"He is awake again," she said slowly. "But Poppy is not happy with his lack of progress. Yesterday was apparently a very great strain on his body, and the burns he suffered were extensive on his extremities."

"Burns?"

"Not from you, Mr Potter. We're actually not sure where they came from."

There was an almost audible click in his subconscious as Harry began to see the connections. "Right, that makes it more urgent. If you'll excuse me, I'm skiving off lunch to have that chat."

McGonagall waved him off, though he barely paid attention. Harry was determined to track down Dumbledore and discuss several things. The infirmary was quiet, though his entrance brought Madam Pomfrey out of her office. She frowned at him briefly before he simply pointed to the room the headmaster was in, noting in passing that the room he had been in was now gone. With a curt wave, she went back into her office, which he took to be tacit permission to talk to the man.

As he pushed open the door, Harry saw Dumbledore look up from the Daily Prophet to regard him with a very faint twinkle in his eyes, his right hand wrapped in light gauze. Each finger was wrapped individually, though the very tips were exposed and the palm was fully covered, with the wrap extending past the wrist from what he could

tell. "Ah, Harry, I see you're still making friends here at Hogwarts." Dumbledore turned the paper around so that Harry could read the screaming banner on the front page.

Potter Attacks All Residents at Hogwarts!

Blames others for maiming hundreds!

"Since when was something quickly healed considered maiming? And are there even hundreds here to maim?" Harry asked bitterly. "Maybe if I started attacking the pets all over the place?"

"Now, Harry," Dumbledore said with a faint smile, "that's rather low, even for you."

Harry shrugged and dropped into the chair by the foot of the bed Dumbledore was sitting up in. "How are you feeling today, sir?" Harry thought a polite opening was the safe way to start the imminent conversation.

"I'll be fine, or so I'm told," Dumbledore said calmly. "Sadly, all this time stuck in here gives me nothing to do but think. I'd much rather be up and about."

"Ah," Harry said with his wolfish smile, "thinking. That's rather convenient, actually. I was wondering, sir, if you could tell me why you never pulled me out of the Dursleys', since you checked up on me there?"

Harry could have sworn that Dumbledore blinked, but it was far too fast to be sure. "You've met Arabella, then?"

"Dodging the topic now, are we?"

Dumbledore sighed and looked at the paper he was holding briefly before he set it aside. "No, Harry. Tell me, how do you feel about the use of Legilimency?"

“Ah, twenty questions, my favourite.” Harry failed to even try to keep the sarcasm from his voice. “If I have any reason to doubt someone’s veracity, I’m using it.”

“And that is where we shall disagree, Harry. I will use it if I must, but I prefer only to do so when it’s essential to know the truth and when there is a strong reason to believe I am being misled. What truth did I have, Harry? When I heard Arabella’s complaint, I could see you were not dressed as well as your cousin, but beyond that?” Dumbledore took his glasses off and rubbed at his eyes for a moment. “I did speak to your aunt, Harry, and she gave me no reason to suspect anything untoward was going on. There were no external signs that I could see, short of demanding to examine the house in person or using Legilimency against a woman that held no love of me.”

Harry said nothing, but he could feel flashes of anger in the back of his brain. “So you took her word for it and looked no further?”

“Three times, Harry, I checked up on you specifically, though I was in the area a few times other than that. There was nothing to make me think I should force the issue.”

“And you never even thought to just ask me directly?” Harry surprised himself with the bitterness in his voice. He knew it was in the past, just as knew it was not his own fault for what happened, but that did not mean it did not still bother him.

“That would have been most unwise.” Dumbledore held his hand up to forestall Harry’s rebuttal, so Harry let him finish. “Harry, if there were nothing actually wrong transpiring, and I asked that question of you, what do you think would have happened? Allow me to sketch the sequence for you. You would have told your aunt and uncle, and then there would have been an investigation, with the name Harry Potter splashed all over official records, and ultimately the Ministry would have found where you were staying. Do you think that would have been a good thing? Do you think you would have been left there and not carted off to a group they approved of, such as the Crouch



family? Or, even more risky, the Malfoys perhaps? We did talk about this before, if you care to recall.”

Harry could feel his resentment stirring, but he understood the logic of the argument. The only compromise would have been to use Legilimency on an unsuspecting child, which the headmaster had already made clear would only be done if there were powerful reasons for it. “Is this the same argument for why you never used Legilimency on the Slytherin trouble-makers?”

Dumbledore sighed again but shook his head. “No, Harry. As we have discussed, I trusted Severus to do what was right, though it seems he was not following my stated desires for those students.”

Harry harrumphed loudly, disgruntled with the weak answers. He could understand the man’s point of view about the Dursleys, to a very limited extent, but hindsight was ever twenty-twenty. Trusting to judgment or criticism of others from such a perspective was risky, at best, and downright foolhardy for people who were not even aware of the situation when it occurred. And yet, he could find no acceptance of the answer regarding the Slytherin students Harry had eradicated from Hogwarts, one way or another.

“All right, Headmaster. I don’t like it, but I’ll bring it up again later.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore said quietly, “as I said before, and I shall say many times again, I am sorry for my mistakes. I am but human.”

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It was no use, and indeed served no purpose, to yell or scream at the man. He lived according to his own morals and rules, and his judgment was not for Harry to decide. While forgiveness was hard to grant, Harry knew that someday, he might actually do so. Someday in the vague future.

“Moving on, sir,” Harry said quietly, still with his eyes closed, “does your magic work yet?”

“Changing topics indeed, Harry.” He heard the man rustle in the blankets for a moment, before he heard a faint whistling of something moving rapidly through the air as he heard a soft cry of, “Lumos!”

When he opened his eyes again, he saw the headmaster frowning at his wand, with the expected result – there was no light coming from the wand tip. “It would appear, Harry, that it still does not work.”

“Have you talked to anyone about the message I received yesterday?”

“I see you are indeed a fan of twenty questions. Yes, I received a version of it from Cyril this morning, as relayed through Remus.”

Harry got up and paced slightly, wanting to approach the problem from a standpoint that would make sense. His intuition was telling him something, but he could find no reason to logically prove it. “Are you further aware that your aura bleeds off the bed and down through the floor?”

Dumbledore looked faintly surprised at that news. “No.”

“Would you try the Lumos spell again, sir?”

Dumbledore nodded, flicking the wand rapidly, the soft whistle filling the room. Harry ignored the verbal incantation and focused on how the headmaster’s aura flared slightly, bleeding again into the floor with a touch more brightness than was there before he tried.

“I’ll tell you what I think. That orb cannot work over such distances, nor was Riddle in the castle, so the power had to come from somewhere close. Normally, I would say it was impossible beyond some hundred feet or so, but I’m unclear exactly how far this room is from the Great Hall, where I was sitting. You, sir, were the power source for the orb.”

Harry paused as Dumbledore regarded him thoughtfully. “The burns you suffered were caused by the distance and the power levels

necessary to supply the orb, and the forced drain of your magic likely gave you the seizures.”

Dumbledore began nodding slowly, though it was clear he was not fully accepting the explanation. “Moreover, when I was brought up here, your burns should have stopped as the distance was less, but your seizures would have continued since it was a foreign control. I’ll have to ask if that’s the case . . .” Harry trailed off as he considered the implications. There was surely more factors involved, for how Riddle knew that someone would be able to act as a power source here in the castle – that was one question that had no direct answer.

“I think there is more to it than this, but what I believe is that your magic is being siphoned off to feed Voldemort. Since he’s too far away, it’s being drained directly into the flux lines.” Harry considered the idea of how Riddle knew about anyone being able to power the orb further, for there was really only one explanation, one that matched up with Cyril’s stated beliefs. “Someone here told him of our return, and when he discovered the Gaunt house damage, he knew. The orb was a test, or maybe . . . maybe it was meant to do something beyond us chatting. Maybe he thought I was the one who had been affected by the magic at the Gaunt house?”

Harry saw that things were only murkier the more he looked at them. There was a new question as to whether Riddle sent any of the letters Harry had destroyed, or if he only sent the orb – in which case, he must have been informed of the Weasley matriarch’s attempts to communicate as well as the outcome. The timing was too much of a coincidence. He could not accept that it was only random chance that the orb had arrived on the one day he had accepted mail delivery. The idea that Riddle might also know a Horcrux was missing was interesting as well – he would likely suspect it had taken control of someone, which made the orb even more interesting as a puzzle. At some key point, all of the webs should untangle, if Harry could only discern what the key point was.

Harry looked back at the headmaster and saw the same introspection on the man’s face. “Somehow, what happened to you at the Gaunt house affected your magic, such that you are now his toy, as it were.”

Dumbledore continued to look pensive as Harry moved about the room, looking for new angles on the ideas he had sketched. Surely there was more behind it all. If Riddle knew that they had destroyed a Horcrux, surely there would have been a more violent reaction. But then, the man had sounded almost genuine during some of his comments, which left Harry puzzled about what exactly Riddle was after. Regardless of the stated intent, Harry had no faith that Riddle was telling the truth about anything, for it would be impossible to sift the words for the rare nugget of truth about something.

“I will grant the possibility, Harry,” Dumbledore said into the silence. “And yet, if this is true, why did Crowley not find it, as you said he would? How would we break the bond if it exists?”

Harry stopped pacing and considered the questions fully. “No idea, really. I would have said this was impossible, frankly, so I don’t know if Crowley would have looked for it, let alone known how to look for it. As for fixing it, we can try a couple of things, and then I can call in the cavalry again.”

“What experiments do you propose?”

Harry held up two fingers. “First, we can see if it’s attached to your conduits, as if it’s based on your magical signature. I can alter your signature temporarily, though you may find it uncomfortable. Second, I can disrupt your magic entirely and see if that cancels the spell – but that’s going to hurt. The controlling spell may require feeding off your magic to work at all, so if you remove the source, it might wither and die.”

Dumbledore nodded faintly at the suggestions, but his eyes were no longer even faintly twinkling. “Perhaps you should ask Poppy to join us, then, Harry.”

Harry nodded briefly before he went to fetch Madam Pomfrey. She was sitting at a large desk in her office, a lunch tray spread out as she was pouring over an old tome. Harry rapped the doorframe smartly.

Madam Pomfrey looked up sharply. "Yes, Mr Potter?"

"The headmaster would like you to join us for a moment, Madam."

She rose quickly, a concerned look on her face. "Is he all right? In pain? Breathing difficulties?"

Harry shook his head quickly. "No, he's fine, but we would like to try something, and he asked for your counsel first."

Madam Pomfrey huffed slightly as she strode past Harry and led him back into the small room. "What crazy idea do you have now, Headmaster?" Her voice was laced with exasperation, much to Harry's amusement.

Dumbledore smiled benignly and gestured towards Harry with his bandaged hand. "Not I, Poppy, but Harry here. He thinks he might be able to determine what's wrong, but he's concerned about the discomfort it might cause."

Madam Pomfrey shot Harry a withering look. "Him? Concerned? Surely you've mistaken him for someone else, or else he's an imposter."

Harry winced at the statement, but Dumbledore just twinkled lightly at the matron. It was true he was unconcerned for the discomfort, for he had warned the man it would be uncomfortable. If the headmaster wanted to try it, it was his choice. Harry certainly was not going to force the tests on him.

"Very well, what do you propose, Mr Potter?"

Harry tried to give her a polite smile instead of the smile that Neville feared, but he was unsure exactly how well it worked. "I'm going to apply some aura magic to him, Madam. It might be a tad uncomfortable but not too bad."

"Not too bad by whose definition of 'bad', Mr Potter? Yours?"

Harry kept his smile in place and merely shrugged. "May I?"

"Please, Harry, at your convenience," Dumbledore said before Madam Pomfrey could say anything more. Harry stepped directly to the side of the headmaster and focused on his magic. Gathering it to his hands, he took a firm grip on the headmaster's bandaged one, and Harry slowly pushed his aura out. Almost immediately, he could see his aura flare, overpower Dumbledore's, and then bleed off into the floor just as Dumbledore's own magic did. He stopped pushing and stepped back, breaking the contact.

Dumbledore was regarding him with intent eyes, a hint of wonder on his face. "What was that?"

"Ah, I forced my magic to change yours a bit. Sorry, it didn't work. It just bled off like your own magic does. Did that bother you at all?"

Dumbledore was turning his hand over repeatedly, flexing the individually wrapped fingers. "Fascinating. It was like a low-power Scouring Charm, I should think." The headmaster looked up at Harry and nodded. "The second test you said was likely to be painful, correct?"

Harry nodded, but this time he kept one eye on Madam Pomfrey. "Painful, how?" Her sharp question was fully expected.

"I don't know. I've done this once before, and it . . . made the recipient experience some level of pain. I don't know how much, and he was not as, err, well, old as the headmaster is." Harry looked around for a moment, noticing the portrait that had been moved into the room. "I should also warn you, this will severely disrupt any magic around you, Headmaster. Once I do this, I'll have to manually drag it out of here to dispose of it. It's technically a security breach, but not much of one, since aside from punching holes in wards, it also makes magic very, very unstable around it."

Dumbledore looked at Madam Pomfrey, the question evident in his eyes. She was frowning at Harry, but she clearly relented when she proceeded to float all the potions and instruments out of the room. "All

right, Mr Potter, what do you need to do?" Her tone was still sharp, but he was almost certain he heard a hint of curiosity in it.

"You'll need to lift the headmaster up, Madam, while I rearrange his blanket. He needs to be on top of it, and then have it loosely wrapped around him." Harry waited while she lifted the headmaster up with a silent charm, and Harry rearranged the blanket to be short-sheeted. With the extra laying off the side, Harry nodded to the matron, who promptly lowered the headmaster back on top of the bed. Harry threw the excess material over the top of the headmaster, being sure it covered up to his neck but had space to cover his face as well.

"Professor, I'm going to cover your face and then Transfigure this blanket into, uh, something else. I'm going to leave this on top of you for a few minutes, either until it looks like it won't work, or your aura stops flaring. You need to stay under it unless Madam Pomfrey tells me to stop." Harry waited until he had a sign of acceptance and then covered the man's head.

Drawing a deep breath, Harry concentrated on what he was about to do. His own core was still relatively low in charge, so he was unsure he would be able to do much more than this today if it failed – or worked. "No one try to use any magic once I do this, right?" With a glance at Madam Pomfrey, who gave him a curt nod, Harry touched his wand directly to the blanket and Transfigured it into a fine cotton mesh with tiny inset metallic crystals at the cross points. Harry quickly lifted his wand and stuffed it back in the holster. It would be dangerous to leave it in contact with the materials he had just created.

With a scream of flame and rage, Fawkes appeared in the infirmary, crying out a song of terrible loss. Almost concurrently, the headmaster let out a moan, and Harry saw the aura that stretched to the floor falter. Behind him, he heard a soft crump-crump-crump as the magic walls collapsed back down to the bricks from which they were assembled. A few items were shifting around in the nearby space of the infirmary as the magic holding things in place suddenly ceased working properly, and the painting by the headmaster crashed to the floor. "Fawkes! Wait! We're trying to heal him!"

The phoenix dove rapidly for the bed, and Harry dropped to the floor to get out of the way. "Don't uncover him!" he shouted. When there was no immediate reaction aside from a quiet crooning, Harry looked up to see the phoenix settled on the top of the headboard, feet shifting and his crest raised.

"It's doing something good," Harry said quickly before Madam Pomfrey could move closer. "Give it a moment." The headmaster thrashed weakly, still firmly covered, and his moan turned into a weak cry of pain. The aura was no longer touching the floor, though tendrils were reaching out in random directions.

Harry climbed back to his feet, gestured at the sudden mess around them and gave a faint shrug to the matron. "Sorry about that, but I do think it's working," he offered to her, as she winced and shifted from foot to foot, clearly ready to intercede to the headmaster's benefit. Fawkes looked no happier than she did.

As Harry saw his watch tick off nearly one full minute, the aura flare was almost invisible, merely glowing faintly above the mesh material. The headmaster was no longer thrashing or crying but had gone back to moaning. "One more minute," he suggested to the mediwitch. She looked uncertain but nodded her acceptance anyway.

As the second minute elapsed, the aura flare had changed not at all from the end of the first minute. With a sigh, Harry flipped the mesh off the headmaster, ignoring the discomfort in his fingers, and then scooped the man up in his arms. "Throw that on the floor, would you?" he asked quietly.

When Madam Pomfrey grabbed the mesh, she retracted her hand immediately with a sharp cry of surprise. She frowned at Harry before she took a firm grip, squinting slightly, and removed the mesh from the bed, leaving it in a heap upon the floor. As soon as the bed was clear, Harry gratefully set the headmaster back down. Harry thought the man certainly did not look as heavy as the load had felt, but those wizard robes were quite adept at hiding bulk. The headmaster was still moaning slightly, obviously in discomfort, so Harry moved back to the side and let Madam Pomfrey look at him. Fawkes was singing a



song of pleasure, which was a marked contrast to the first song he cried out upon arrival.

“Can I use magic?” the matron asked urgently.

“Wait a moment,” Harry replied, gathering up the mesh material into a thick bundle. As soon as he made firm skin contact with it, he felt as though he was being covered in mild electric shocks. The more he gathered, the stronger the shocks became, until it was all he could do to hold the fabric up. With a grunt for the pain, he dropped it back onto the floor. Irritated for not thinking clearly, Harry carefully stepped around the mesh and stripped a blanket off a different bed. With as little contact to the mesh as he could sustain, he bundled it in the blanket to avoid the direct skin contact. Trying to ignore the faint discomfort and hair-raising feelings the mesh induced, he carried the wrapped bundle over the tops of the blocks that had collapsed and dropped it by the main doors to the infirmary, ignoring the clatter of objects falling to the floor as he approached. Sighing at the relief from dropping it, he turned back to Madam Pomfrey. “Try now.”

She flicked her wand in a few rapid strokes and then smiled at him faintly. “It works.”

Harry nodded and came back over to where the headmaster lay, dropping back into the chair he had occupied earlier and happy to be free of the unpleasant sensations. It took several minutes by Harry’s watch before the headmaster finally opened his eyes. His twinkle was weak, but present, while the man reached up his hand and stroked Fawkes feathers gently. “Hello, Fawkes,” the headmaster said quietly. A moment later, Dumbledore slowly sat up in bed and cautiously reached out to the wand on the table. “Shall I?”

Madam Pomfrey bit her lip, but she nodded acquiescence anyway. Harry merely shrugged. “Lumos!” The wand lit up, but it was very weak. “Nox!”

Madam Pomfrey reached one hand out and smiled faintly. “Your magic is drained severely, Headmaster. You should rest now.”

Dumbledore offered them all a wan smile as he lay back in the bed. "You were right, Harry. That certainly did hurt."

"Err, good to know, I suppose. I'm not sure if that's a permanent fix or not, but I guess time will tell." Harry looked at the phoenix that was regarding him solemnly. "I'm going to take this stuff out and dispose of it, far from the castle. Then I'm off to my home, but I'll be back as usual." Harry paused as he walked back toward the mess he had left by the infirmary doors. "I'll look in on you tomorrow, sir."

"Thank you, Harry," he heard faintly as he gathered up the mesh. Harry looked back to see Madam Pomfrey fluttering about the headmaster, and then he turned his gaze to the bundled mesh at his feet. He knew there was no way he could get it out of the castle through the corridors, for he would surely cause irreparable damage to far too much of the castle. While that might please Umbridge as an excuse to kick him out, he rather wanted to avoid the chastisement his Mentor would level at him, never mind another run-in with McGonagall. Cyril was downright fond of Hogwarts and always disapproved of idle damage to the building.

With a sigh, Harry approached the window opposite the matron's office and looked out at the grounds beside the main entrance to the castle. Unlocking the window and pushing it open, he looked about to be sure no one was on the grounds. It was still the lunch hour, so hopefully he could get away with his plan. This time, he picked up the bundled corner of the mesh and dragged it back toward the window, and by keeping it at arm's length the level of discomfort was quite tolerable. Harry carefully stayed far away from the headmaster before he dumped the entire mess out the window. Closing it firmly behind him, he hurried out of the infirmary with a fast wave to the resident patient and Healer, heading for the exit.

Harry rushed past the Great Hall, where he could hear everyone eating, and tried to think small thoughts, hoping that no one would notice and follow him. As he made it out the doors of the entrance hall, he rounded the stairs and ran to the mesh, which had fallen out of the wrapping blanket somewhat when it hit the ground. He paused to carefully extract the blanket from the mesh and drag it far enough

away that he felt it safe to use magic on it. Using a Permanent Camouflage Charm, he converted the blanket to look like standard-issue Muggle military green camouflage. He knew his core was reaching precariously low levels, but he hoped that he would need to use little or no magic for the rest of the day. Dragging the wrapping back, he slowly shuffled the mesh into the blanket, wrapping it up firmly again. Picking up just a small corner, Harry pulled the bundle along the ground and did his best to ignore the vaguely unpleasant sensations in his fingers.

Harry dropped the corner when he realized that dragging the bundle would leave a trail, let alone make him uncomfortable for the hike he was about to engage in. Looking about, Harry spotted a stout branch that was long enough for his purposes. After carrying the branch back to his package, he tied the blanket-wrapped mesh to the end of the stick like an over-sized knapsack, and then he slung the stick over his shoulder. While he might now resemble someone aimlessly following train tracks, his personal discomfort was no more than the moderate pressure the bundle and stick imparted upon his shoulder.

As he walked toward the Hogwarts gates, he did his best to avoid thinking about what he was carrying and the risk it presented to his person. Instead, he tried to think about what he had just done and whether it would be a permanent solution or not. The fact that the magic disruptor mechanism had worked at all was perplexing.

When he finally walked what he estimated to be at least two miles away from both Hogsmeade and Hogwarts, Harry dragged the mesh into the bushes at the base of a giant spruce. There was no easy way to bury it, so he would have to just let it slowly decompose in the wilderness, though the metallic crystals would be there for years to come. The lack of any trails that he had seen since departing the main path left him comfortable with his decision to just leave it for now. Later, he could always come back and put the effort into a more secure burial, but he was far too tired to deal with it at that moment.

His task finished, Harry walked back towards Hogwarts for several minutes before he stopped to glance around. Seeing no one and no magical auras, Harry clapped his hand to his watch and activated the Portkey home.

Harry felt a mixture of relief and frustration when he arrived and found that the house was empty. A note from Remus stated that they were all doing damage control, which he assumed to be referring to Riddle's little bombshell, while David was working late at the shop. Hedwig was off somewhere, but he knew she was safe whatever she was doing.

On the one hand, Harry very much wanted someone, anyone, whom he could talk with openly, without all of the indirection and innuendo. At the same time, he also was happy not to have to talk about anything, given how his day had gone so far. He was tired physically, mentally, and magically, and today was not helping him boost his reserves at all. It also held little hope for his physical recovery, given the lack of rest he had managed.

After making himself a large lunch, Harry lounged about, researching some of the classical theory of Dark magic that allowed control over others. Nothing he read was particularly useful when considered in the context of Dumbledore's problem, and he eventually fell asleep in the living room on the sofa. He was unable to remember his dreams on waking, but they were faintly unpleasant, as though he should be afraid of something he could no longer remember. Stretching, he saw that it was nearly six in the evening and that his nap had lasted nearly two hours. He felt better for it, though his stomach was telling him it wanted more sustenance.

Harry thought about going back early to check in on the headmaster and then tackle some of the homework he had been putting off. It was far from challenging, merely tedious work of little interest. On his way to the kitchen, Harry recalled the conversation with Ginny from the infirmary and left a short note asking Edgar to look into the scenarios that might result in the strange situation she had hinted at. While he was certain there were more details to be learned, he needed an independent analysis of whatever picture she soon would be painting. After wolfing down a pair of sandwiches and a tall glass of water, Harry left the house and walked to the exit point.

"One moment, Mr Potter," Floppy's voice called out as he exited the wards.

Harry, for once, felt refreshed enough to not lash out at the Hat or its insistent demands for his attention. Harry slumped to the ground, laying about in the grass, and stared at the sky. "How now, Floppy?"

"Your Mentor gave you some sound advice earlier, Mr Potter. Your own actions today have shown that it was quite true, as well. Have you considered it further?" Floppy's tone was surprisingly detached compared to how much invective the Hat could normally impose.

"Not really, I suppose." Harry paused to scratch absently at one leg. "Cyril told me a lot of things, but I'm not sure he understands how much he's asking of me or of them."

"And yet, you have been almost desperate to talk about these things. Cyril refused you, the headmaster was unable to continue the conversation, and no one was here just now." Harry thought there was a faintly smug tone creeping into Floppy's voice. "At the same time, two minds have repeatedly inquired to know more, to understand, and you rebuff them."

"Oh, that's subtle, Floppy. Very subtle. You want me to chat with you again, do you? Who's the other one?" Harry quickly tried to think of everything that had happened today. "Oh, Ginny I suppose, or perhaps Hermione if I were listening to Cyril."

"I'm not here to be subtle, Mr Potter. A talking hat isn't exactly what most people think of when they contemplate that word, now is it?"

Harry's refreshed feeling was fading, replaced by a growing irritation. "Most people don't expect talking hats, full stop, let alone sarcastic ones."

"What, precisely, are you afraid of?"

"What? What the hell are you on about, Floppy?"

“It’s simple, Mr Potter.” Floppy now sounded blatantly smug. “You’re afraid. Of what? Talking to someone? Making a closer friend that you intend to? Having someone else to care about?”

Harry sat up, fighting the urge to chuck the Hat off. He already knew that was a futile gesture after the events in the Gryffindor common room, but it would still be somewhat satisfying. “Oh, sure, colour me chicken.” Harry’s voice could have cut stone, but he had no need to coddle the damned Hat.

“I should have put you in Hufflepuff, Mr Potter. Your loyalty to those you love is numbing in its scope, but you are far too Slytherin in how you try to make friends.”

“What d’you mean, try?! What’s Neville, then, chopped liver?”

“Hardly. Mr Longbottom is safe to you. He is no threat and will never be a threat to your plans, your dominance, and your cultivated disregard for others.”

“Oh? And who, pray tell, is not safe?”

“The headmaster is not safe. He challenges your dominance. Miss Weasley is not safe to you, as she challenges your plans, your aggressiveness. And Miss Granger is not safe to you, for she challenges your self-perceived superiority in magic.”

“Oh, so I should just go suck up to everyone else? Hand out the secrets we’re keeping and trust them to do the right thing?” Harry snorted in derision. “Right, Floppy, that’s just pure genius!”

“Mr Potter, must you dive straight into absurdity every time I try to talk with you?”

“If you’d stop bringing up absurd topics, it might help!” Harry felt real venom creeping into his voice. Floppy injected some commentary on a near-daily basis, trying to get Harry to open up or reconsider something long since decided. The Hat had no comprehension of the pressure of life since it was immune to the real world.

“You clamour and cry out for someone to speak to, and when I offer, you run away. When I point out others that you could speak with, you stick your fingers in your ears and drum your heels on the ground. When I point this out to you, you tell me I am being absurd. Which of us is being absurd here, Mr Potter?”

“Oh, right, it’s my problem, always,” Harry shot back. “When I point out your lack of understanding of the real world, you casually dismiss it. When I point out that in real life you’ve not the time for analysing everything, you tell me I’m acting too rashly. If you want me to talk to you, maybe you should try talking to me and not lecturing!”

“Very well. Will you then speak to Miss Granger, Harry?” The Hat’s abrupt change in pace and tone left Harry stuck with one fist in the air, his mouth open and ready to argue on. For the first time, Floppy used his name, and that fact did not pass by unnoticed.

He took a few deep breaths to calm down somewhat, before forcing a more civil tone himself. “I’m undecided, I think. I don’t like how she reminds me of Riddle.”

“Understandably, perhaps, but what of Cyril’s thoughts? What of your own parallels?”

Harry sighed and lay back down in the grass. “I don’t know, Floppy. Obviously, I know me, and you know me, I guess. I’m not another Riddle in the making, but how do I become certain about her?”

“Other than talking to her?” Floppy sounded, surprisingly, like Remus, Harry realised. The Hat had shifted cadence, tone, and vocabulary. That was . . . worrisome. “Perhaps, Harry, you should ask her friends some questions?”

Harry knew that was common sense, but the problem was that he was unsure who exactly Hermione’s friends were. He knew she dated Ron, however she might try to hide it, but Ron would be a very unwilling subject for interrogation. Ginny was friends with her, as was Neville, but that did not equate to being best friends. All things

considered, Ginny was the first target for any line of inquiry, since she was a friend and also female. It was unlikely that Hermione would closely confide in any male, given how she was handling her relationship with Ron.

“Ginny, I should think,” Harry said after a while. “She’s female, so Hermione would be more likely to confide in her. She’s also known her for years.”

“A good starting point, perhaps,” Floppy calmly returned. “And what of Mr Riddle’s offer of yesterday, then?”

“Floppy, this is the most civil conversation we’ve had in days. Let’s not push it too hard, eh?”

“All right, Harry. I’ll ask again tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Harry took a deep breath. “And thanks, Floppy.”

“You’re welcome, Harry.”

With a deep breath, Harry jumped to his feet and stretched briefly. Activating the Portkey back to the gates of Hogwarts, Harry strode inside, determined to talk to Ginny. First, he would consult the Map, as that would be the fastest way to find her – assuming she was not in detention again. Keeping Cyril’s words in mind, Harry tried to nod politely at the people he passed on his way back to his suite, but that seemed to be somewhat less than successful. Most people became rather nervous and backed away as he passed, no matter what type of smile he tried to use.

With a sigh, Harry found another source of disappointment when he realised that Ginny was in the Gryffindor common room. That meant he had to get past the Fat Lady, who was likely to still be quite irritated with him. Harry had no intention of apologising to her, however, given that he was only forcing her to do her job.



As he stood in front of her, the Fat Lady regarded him with a smug smile. Harry gave the password in as civil and polite a manner as he could. "Patronus."

"Nope, not opening." The Fat Lady's smile became an outright smirk.

"Didn't I just give you the password?"

"That's the old password, Mr Potter."

Harry drummed his fingers on the picture frame, earning him a glower from the subject of the painting. "You admit to knowing me and knowing I'm supposed to have access to this room, yet you are denying me that access?"

"No password, no access. Those are the rules." If anything, Harry thought she was asking for him to test how flammable old castle paintings were.

"Look, are you going to open or not?" Harry knew he could go back to his suite and check the Map, thus learning the password, but he felt there was a principle at stake here. If she thought refusing him admittance would stop him, then every painting would believe that saying 'no' was a worthwhile exercise.

The Fat Lady huffed and walked smartly out of her frame. Harry glared at her as she gave him a smug smile before stepping out, and he could hear mocking laughter echoing from a portrait several yards down the corridor.

Shrugging, Harry placed the tip of his wand between the seam of the portrait and the wall, laying it length-wise against the stone. Why anyone thought a portrait was a particularly safe door was beyond him, but that was the nature of trusting randomly. One mild Banishing Charm later, the portrait was wide open, and there was a faint screech coming from down the corridor.

"Weasley." Harry's voice cut across the common room, whose inhabitants were staring at him as he stood in the doorway. He held

Ginny's eyes with his own and nodded fractionally into the hallway. "Let's go."

Ginny hesitated for just a moment before she handed her books to Dean, who was sitting next to her. As she strode towards where he stood, he could see the whispers starting, though he was unable to make out any words.

As Ginny passed him, Harry roughly shut the portrait-door and ignored the Fat Lady, who was muttering vile commentary while setting to rights her now-dishevelled abode. "You really have a way with people, don't you?" Ginny asked as they began walking down the corridor.

"Paintings aren't people." Harry grabbed her elbow and steered her into a random classroom they were passing.

"Not being alive doesn't equal not having feelings, Harry," Ginny said rather sharply. "And would you care to explain what we're doing?"

Harry ignored her, sealing the door and casting Imperturbable Charms about the room. As he continued to pace and cast charms, he could see that Ginny was getting anxious. While Harry thought it would be amusing to hold her here until she cracked and started spilling whatever was on her mind, there were few hours before curfew, and he needed answers.

"Twenty questions, Ginny. I'm asking, and you're answering to the best of your ability. No artful indirections or the like. If it helps, I'm invoking your fealty pledge." When Ginny sat abruptly, Harry knew his point was made.

"What about?" Ginny's voice sounded faintly sick, as though she were resigned to whatever was coming.

"Granger." Ginny's head whipped up, and she openly stared at him. "First, why is she so determined to learn everything?"

Ginny said nothing, which frustrated him. She was blinking owlily, and he was unable to tell if she had suddenly gone mute or was actually thinking about what he had asked. Unable to stop the thoughts in his head, he paced the edges of the room, trying to resist the urge to shake the redhead sitting calmly in the chair.

“I don’t know.” Ginny’s voice made him freeze to hear everything she said. He kept his eyes on her face, studying her body language as she looked off towards a corner of the ceiling. “Truly, she’s always been a bit . . . err, over the top, like she is around you. It’s not anything to do with you, or at least, I don’t think so.”

Ginny seemed uncomfortable for some reason, something that was definitely different from her first reaction when he began sealing the room. Harry could almost feel time slipping away, and he wanted, no, needed to understand. “Elaborate. She’s always been like this?”

Ginny shrugged eloquently. “I think so. She’s always been so driven in classes, at least, and she spends loads of time in the library.”

Harry found no comfort in this information. It confirmed that Hermione was driven to knowledge and was not on some personal agenda because she saw Harry invoke some random thing that she found particularly alluring, like a bird with a shiny bit of tinsel. Somehow, the idea that Hermione would ever be in the ‘ooh, shiny’ mode was disquieting, though finding out she was spending all her time in the library was unsettling for different reasons.

“What does she read about in the library?”

Ginny looked surprised at the question, as though Harry were suddenly asking inane questions. “What doesn’t she? Half the time, she’s researching everything around what we’re doing in class that week. The other half, it’s totally random – some topic that caught her eye, some puzzle, or just trying to read every single book in there.” Ginny mock-shuddered for a moment. “A couple of years ago she took up the cause of house-elf treatment. Be very happy that you weren’t around then.”

So she was working her way through the library. Priority was given for school-related topics, but idle time was dedicated to reading the rest. Harry wondered for a moment if she had found how to get past the Restricted Section alarms but discarded the question almost immediately. If he found it easier to get permission officially than to deal with them, then surely Hermione would as well. Given her intellect and evident camaraderie with the students and staff, it would be trivial for her to secure access as she desired.

“What was so bad about her cause?”

Ginny gave him a slight frown, but he was unsure why. “Look, I’ll agree some house-elves are treated hideously, but most aren’t. Still, her idea to reform the world in her own mindset wasn’t popular with us or the elves.”

Hermione wanted to reform the world, and she had some idea of moral superiority in the case of the elves. From the hints Ginny was dropping, it sounded like her ideals were being forced upon the elves as well as the humans. Harry could almost feel a tic by his eye start up.

“All right, family then. What do you know of her family?”

Ginny gave him a long look, one that invited all kinds of explanations, which Harry ignored. “Only child, parents both dentists. She loves them, but they seem to have quite a distant relationship.”

Harry stopped in mid-pace, his blood pounding in his ears. Harry swung around and moved a chair to directly face Ginny, sitting as close as he could without actually being on top of her. The unspoken cues she could provide would centre on her facial expressions, and he wanted to be sure he could see everything clearly.

“Distant how?”

Ginny looked a little unnerved to have Harry’s gaze locked on her so blatantly, but he was not about to let her evade his questions now.

With a fast hand-rolling gestured, he all but demanded she explain immediately.

“It’s weird. She goes on holiday with her family for a couple of weeks most summers, but the rest of the time, she’s staying with us at The Burrow. She stays here for her hols most times, with us, or the other times she goes with us to The Burrow.” Ginny leaned back slightly, and Harry shifted to compensate for her movement. He needed to see her eyes, to tell whether she was being candid or not. He would avoid using Legilimency unless it was essential, but he needed to know, and the fealty oath really had no compulsion for this kind of questioning in it.

“So she tells you she loves them, but she doesn’t spend much time with them?”

“Yeah,” Ginny said, and it was clear she was uncomfortable with the close proximity Harry was keeping. “I see her writing to other people, like a friend she made during the Triwizard Tournament, but I never see her writing to her parents. It’s strange to me, since I write home about every other week, but she seems okay with it.”

Harry slumped back and closed his eyes. Now that he had the initial answer, which he felt was Ginny’s best effort at complete honesty, he needed to think. Maintaining that study of her face when she was not giving him the information he needed would be uselessly distracting. It was the angle of her head, the look to the side, and the tightening of the eyes that told him she found it more than strange. It was the set of her hands, clasped but without tension, that told him she accepted it as genuine and just an oddity about her friend. This facet of Hermione’s personality was . . . disconcerting at the least.

“Non sequitur. Why does she hide her relationship with your brother?”

Ginny was again giving him one of those long looks, but this time he was unable to identify what it was she was saying. He needed to spend more time with Tonks, looking over memories like this, getting input into what he was failing to understand. Either Tonks was

incredibly simplistic, which was more than possible, or she had never taught him how to read entire volumes of body language.

“I don’t know that she does,” Ginny finally offered. “It might be that they both want to, or maybe just Ron does and she’s going along with it. Perhaps only she wants to keep it quiet, but it’s also just as likely that they aren’t trying to hide anything at all. I’ve tried to ask about it, and all she’ll do is confirm they’re together.”

“Why would he want to keep it secret?”

Ginny raised one hand and made a see-sawing gesture. “Hard to say, exactly. I think, though, that it’s because he’s afraid of our brothers’ reactions.”

“Why?”

“Harry, Ron’s never had anything that’s just his, you know? Whatever it is, it’s always been something he had to share. Fred and George are pretty ruthless when they find a weakness, and that’s Ron’s big one. He wants stuff to be his, you know?”

“That’s stupid. He’s not going to share his girlfriend.”

“No, but that doesn’t mean Fred and George won’t give him hell anyway. Or tell really embarrassing stories about him.” Ginny smiled sadly for a moment. “I love my brothers, really I do, but sometimes, Fred and George go beyond the pale and actually hurt. They don’t mean to, but they don’t always know when to stop.”

Harry said nothing to that, instead contemplating the ideas she expressed. Ron had jealousy issues, which was understandable to a very small extent. Beyond that, it seemed an issue of maturity. Perhaps her brother lacked the life experiences to see beyond the emptiness of possessive urges. “And if Hermione is part of the hiding effort? What would be her motivation?”

“Don’t know,” Ginny said after a moment. “It could be like her parents; she doesn’t talk about personal things. Or it could be that

she doesn't want to give up the appearance of propriety, since she's determined to get Head Girl."

That struck another chord with Harry, though he was not about to tell Ginny that. The parallels between Hermione and Riddle were adding up far faster than he wanted to think about. "Your brother seems to be angry a lot. Why?"

Ginny rolled her shoulders and made a vague hand motion at the ceiling. "Pick any random reason because it has been or will be true sooner or later. Part of the redhead problem, you know, that volatile temper."

Harry waved the answer off, as he knew that was a futile line of questioning. He knew why Ron was hacked off at him, but that did not translate as to why her brother might be irritable with others. The real concern was that Ron's temper was not a barrier to Hermione, which meant either she could handle it or there could be something more serious going on. While Hermione had never given him the impression of using people, these little parallels were hitting all the right paranoia notes in his mind.

"Never mind. I shouldn't have asked. What does Hermione do for fun?"

Ginny laughed lightly, breaking the tension that had been building up. "The library? Hello?"

Harry scowled at her, annoyed with the laughter. "You're telling me she doesn't do anything else? School work, library, sleep, eat, the broom cupboard on the seventh floor every other day at half nine, and that's it?"

Ginny went very, very still. She had a look in her eyes that was all fire and sparkles, and Harry suddenly was curious what she was planning for a broom cupboard. "That sounds about right," she said warmly, her mind clearly elsewhere.

“So, to sum up, she has a vision for the world and isn’t shy about pushing it, she’s a loner if not with Ron, is driven to succeed at all costs, wants to know everything about magic, and hides her personal life.”

Ginny was frowning at him, but she nodded her head slowly. “Not the words I would have used, but mostly, yeah.”

Harry stood up and rapidly cancelled all the charms he had placed on the room. “Know where Ron is right now?”

“Playing chess with Seamus.” Ginny was looking at him again in a way that was alien based on his experiences with Tonks. Noting to make time with Tonks as soon as possible, Harry motioned for her to follow him back into the corridor.

“Would you please bring him here?”

“Why? You’re not going to interrogate him, are you? I can tell you it wouldn’t work unless you hexed him and then gave him Veritaserum. He doesn’t like you.”

Harry looked away from her for a moment. It was hard to be serious when she had a smirk on her face that was so twisted. “No, nothing of the sort. I’m going to, err, suggest we go get Hermione out of the library and have some fun.”

“You’re not coming with me?” Ginny had adopted an artful look of innocence, eyelashes batting furiously.

“Do you really want a lecture from the Fat Lady?”

Ginny’s innocence shattered into mirth as she smiled widely. “Not another one, thanks though. Back in a few. I’ll cook up some pretext to get Ron moving.” Harry watched Ginny as she jogged off toward the Gryffindor common room and wondered what the hell he was going to do with her. To follow Cyril’s directives, he should continue to train her and suggest that she consider expanding the group he trained. He would never teach others even half of what he had



agreed to teach her, but perhaps by holding multiple sessions he could divide the trusted from the non-trusted. At the same time, he could be employing some of the new-think Cyril had been demanding.

“ . . . was winning the game, Ginny!” Ron’s dulcet tones were audible long before they came around the corner. Harry thought the boy was almost whinging.

“Ron, you’ve never lost to anyone in Gryffindor. One more routing of your opponent wouldn’t change anything.” Ginny’s tone was nothing so much as just plain tired.

“Still, he could’ve –” Ron’s voice cut short as soon as he saw Harry standing there. Rather than saying anything, the tall redhead looked past Harry as though he were not standing there. “C’mon, Ginny, let’s go.” Ron strode past quickly, which caused Harry to smirk at Ginny once her brother was a few steps past.

Falling into step with Ginny, he casually asked, “Where are you two off to?”

Ginny went back to her innocent look, and Harry was hard pressed not to laugh. “Oh, just the library. We’re going to go check on Hermione.”

“Ah, just the girl I was looking for. I heard she’s quite the expert on house-elves.” Harry saw Ron hunch his shoulders at that statement but followed along as they all walked – or in Ron’s case, nearly stomped – down to the library. Ginny was doing her best not to laugh as Harry told her a story about a three-year-old he had watched in a shop one day stomping around because his mum was ignoring him. If anything, Ron’s footsteps became even louder until they reached the doors to the library.

When Harry and Ginny finally reached the table Hermione was sitting at, Neville waved silently from a nearby table where he was packing up his materials. Harry nodded as Ginny waved back, but Harry kept his attention on Hermione, who was whispering with Ron. It was clear that she was refusing whatever Ron was asking, but Harry started

skimming the titles of the books she had open. They all concerned magic theory, non-verbal magic, and the memoirs of famous magicians.

Harry looked around briefly, saw that Madam Pince was otherwise engaged, and then pulled his wand out as unobtrusively as he could. With a few flicks, all the books were closed, in a neat stack, and Hermione's materials were neatly placed in her bag, which was now resting in Harry's left hand. As she and Ron both turned to glare at him, which Harry thought was about as effectual as glaring at a boulder, Harry gestured curtly toward the doors. "Let's go, Hermione," he hissed.

Harry took the lead and briskly walked out of the library, heading straight for the doors outside. Ginny caught up to him, and he could hear her chuckling as they walked. By the time they were near the front doors, Ginny's voice caught him off guard. "Harry, why don't you ever get lost in the castle?"

Harry managed to avoid showing his surprise, but it was a close thing. "I don't sleep much, so it gives me time to roam around."

Ginny stayed quiet for a moment as they exited the front doors, but then she made it clear that the topic was not closed. "And that's why you took three short-cuts, two of which were secret passages, one of which I've never seen, to get here?"

Harry knew that there were a few ways out of the situation, but the most fun was also the most obscure. Putting on his best smile, the one that Neville told him was just plain wrong, Harry turned to Ginny. "Yep."

Ginny missed a step and almost stumbled before he caught her shoulder, and she gave him a weak glare. Apparently she gave up, since she smiled at him again. "Right. I don't believe you."

Harry shrugged as they came to a stop near the Quidditch pitch. Hermione was huffing and a bit red-faced as she came to a rest near them, while Ron was just glaring at Harry silently. It was obvious the

redhead had no problem keeping up, whereas Hermione was in horrible physical condition.

“Right, here’s the deal. Hermione, you study too much. Snog Ron, fly a few laps, do something not involving books and deep thought.” Harry pulled out his wand again, working an elaborate charm upon the bag in his possession. With a short pause for thought, he then opened it and applied the charm again upon all of the items he could see in the bag. Feeling a bit tired, Harry turned a wan smile on the girl. “In exchange for you spending at least one hour every night doing something fun,” Harry said lightly, “I’ll help you with your magic skills.”

Harry could tell Hermione was interested in the offer, but he was far from finished with her. “However, I need a third party to make sure you’re keeping to the rules. So now, every night at eight sharp, all your items here,” Harry shook the bag lightly and then tossed it to a surprised Ginny, who fumbled it before sinking to the ground with a sharp grunt as the bag landed on top of her, “will transport themselves to Ginny. She’ll keep them safe while you’re off necking or something, right?”

Harry would almost swear that Ron was fighting a smile, but Hermione looked furious. Harry ignored her, though, and turned to Ginny. “Coming? Let’s leave the love birds out here, shall we?”

Harry saluted the two standing there with very different expressions as he headed back for the castle. “As you don’t have your brooms, enjoy the stars, yeah?” Harry called back over his shoulder loudly. He could hear rushing feet behind him, and a quick glance told him that Ginny was coming after him. He was unable to see her expression clearly in the faint light, but he knew he was going to get an earful as soon as they were away from her brother.

As expected, while they were waiting for the first staircase to align usefully, Ginny lit into him with a harsh whisper. “What the hell was that about, Potter?”

Harry shrugged. “She needs to loosen up, and your brother didn’t seem to mind in the end.”

Ginny grabbed his arm and pulled him around to face her directly. "What aren't you telling me?"

Harry glanced around, and seeing that only the portraits were nearby – portraits he had no trust in – he leaned over by her ear and quietly told her, "Your friend Hermione is doing exactly what Tom Riddle did before he became Voldemort. Your answers earlier were very similar to what Riddle was like, and if forcing her to snog with Ron stops the trend, then I'd consider it ire well earned." When he stood up straight again, he could see the alternately flushed and pale sections on her face.

"That's barmy!" Ginny hissed. "She'd never do that!"

"You'd be surprised how many people thought that Riddle, the wonderful Head Boy, could never do what he did, either. The library here is a beautiful thing, but it also has lots of books on Dark magic. You may not know this, but it's very, very addictive magic – and no matter how much you think you might know better, once you start using it, it's only a matter of time. Your friend is smart, sure, but she's not any smarter than Riddle was." Harry ignored her as he headed back to his suite, determined to get some of his dubious homework out of the way. He had a weekend coming up, and he needed to clear his schedule so he could talk with his friends and mentors. As he cleared the staircase and turned back, he saw Ginny watching him from the base of the staircase, clutching Hermione's bag to her chest as she slowly shook her head back and forth in denial.

Harry resumed his solitary trek back to his studies, but he knew that he would pay the price for his actions tonight. While it was possible Hermione was not, after all, headed down the same path Riddle was, Harry was not like the headmaster – he would not leave such things to chance. If there was any way he could prevent it, then he would, and the consequences would not matter in the end. While he was reluctant to teach her directly, it would provide an opportune time to assess her intentions and her skills. If she had been dabbling in Dark magic, Harry would soon know, and then a discussion with Cyril would decide the next steps. For her sake, Harry hoped she had not gone that far into the Restricted Section of the library.

As he entered the suite he shared with Cyril, Harry saw a note sitting on the table between the chairs near the fireplace. Picking it up, he immediately recognised the handwriting of his Mentor.

Harry –

Vencil has asked me to report to him directly. He is less than pleased with the latest developments. Reflect on what we talked about this morning, and see what you can learn about Miss Granger. If I am not back by morning, keep to your schedule as per normal.

C.F.

Harry shrugged absently, tossing the note into the fire. It was only a matter of time, but he suspected that Vencil would be handing down new directives to Cyril, which would in turn mean new directives for Harry. It was something to think about, at least, as he settled down to his homework.

The mirror by his bed stood tall and proud, mocking in a way, as Harry caught his reflection in it. The differences between Riddle and Hermione were there, if he could work them out, but the similarities were far too close to be ignored. And yet, if he was absolutely honest with himself, Floppy had it right. The similarities between Riddle and himself were much, much closer.

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A/N #1 - For non-DLP followers (you DLP types, skip down to A/N #2):

Again, real life is complex, so no assurances on timing of chapters these days. Hopefully the embiggened word count will offset some of the ire over the latency since my last update. I will be out of the country during part of December and perhaps November, and hope to get some solid writing time in then. I seem to do best when travelling for a week here and there, though I prefer to be at home these days.

One interesting question was raised in a review: Why didn't Harry (in *Echoes*) learn to use an English broadsword? It's a good question, but not for the immediate reasons that lie behind it. A bit of history: there is no such thing as a broadsword – not for the English or anyone else. The term was improperly translated a couple hundred years ago, and it's stuck ever since. The closest intelligible root is for those swords with a broad blade, meaning broad or broader than your hand, not today's generic and very imprecise usage for a "long and broad" bladed weapon. It was a term (broad bladed sword) that was supposedly applied early on to weapons for cavalry, for weapons used against cavalry (i.e., cut the horse's legs off), and even for those big heavy things silly English knights would pound on each other with. There were, of course, many other weapons around the world that fell into this category as well. I'm sure some quality time with Google would reveal this, and much more, to the interested reader.

Understanding the intent behind the question, however, let me re-ask it and then answer it. Why does Harry learn Japanese martial arts, as opposed to French, Spanish, Italian, or some other? And why is the sword not a rapier or a sabre or ...? The initial answer is quite simple: as the author, I am writing what I personally know well. I spent something around eight years of my life training very intense martial arts (many hours per day every day of the week) as an adult, and I learned aikijujitsu with bukiwaza (weapons techniques, including kenjitsu) among other things. While I have fought those who studied classical fencing (rapier and sabre) in mock combat as curiosity bouts to see who would win, I know too little of those other styles to write with any semblance of authority or correctness on the topic. For that reason, I cannot seriously consider using it in any story I write. The more important reason, to the characters of the story, however, is that the martial arts outside of Chinese or Japanese and their derivatives do not generally include heavy overall physical conditioning and unarmed combat skills, though this statement is based solely on my exposure and reading about them. The caveat, of course, is unless you are training as a general soldier – in which case an overall minimum physical conditioning is imparted at the beginning of your adjustment. Other styles of martial arts tend to be, from what I understand of them, a more targeted conditioning, as required by the skills being learned. As discussed in an earlier chapter with the therapy session, the goal was first and foremost overall physical

conditioning, with a dash of the rest. That David, Harry's adoptive father, found someone who would teach him more than was needed is indicative of something. Feel free to think about it if you like.

Moving on, the cited legal case of *Dahlia, Ltd v. Yvonne* can be found in "Uncommon Law" by A.P. Herbert, Case No. 49. This is a consolidated reprint of prior publications on cases such as these, but it is paramount to read the illuminating introductions to the text in order to properly understand the context of the cases within. Regardless, it is still a novel legal defence theory. If you're familiar with what I'm referring to obliquely, please don't spoil it for the others should they be motivated to find out for themselves. I'll post more commentary on the case in a future chapter A/N.

For those interested, I have some other one-shots and very short fics that will be coming out soon, a result of a non-compliant muse. If you want to be notified, do the favourite-author flag, rather than favourite-story. I'm not sure the notifications always work, but it might help.

Unrelated, I am sad to say that Robert Jordan passed away recently if you were not aware of it. This event is quite depressing, and not just for the Wheel of Time series. Jordan had a way of writing and thinking that was far above the norm, and all of the unwritten tomes from worlds not yet created that could have come . . . shall never be.

Thanks, as always, to my genius betas who have valiantly strived to make this story better, despite my crafty attempts to make it incomprehensible. Immeasurable thanks to cwarbeck and Chreechree. Thanks also to Reg and Lathac for Brit-picking, Sovran for a pre-publish sanity check, and Sherylyn for her polishing touches before the final posting.

The next A/N is not for regular readers -- well, unless you want to be amused at the sadness of others. Personally, I'd recommend just skipping it and waiting for the next chapter.

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A/N #2 - For DLP followers:

This rest of this A/N is targeted explicitly at the folks from Dark Lord Potter, their fans, and their general hangers-on. If you're not one of them, you really want to just skip the rest of this whole thing, and wait for the next chapter to post.

Let's start with the basic facts. Since almost none of you seem to be capable of actually reading what I wrote in the prior A/N, or using or using your brain voluntarily, I will try to keep it simple for you.

Why would an author deliberately strike out at such as site as DLP?

It's simple. Once upon a time, on the request and recommendation of readers and others, I began posting on additional sites. The first two targets were FicWad, by one reader's particularly interesting comments, and the other was here at FFnet, the clearinghouse for all fanfic, most of which in the HP domain is sadly drivel. After posting at FW for a while, I had an odd request – to also post my story at DLP, although I was warned that Harry-Ginny stories were not favourably received there. In fact, I received several requests to do so, and the later requests – either via PM or via reviews – told me explicitly to drop the H/G issue which was going to ruin an otherwise great story, in their (very not) humble opinions.

Having never heard of DLP, I looked it up via Google, and went to see what it was about. Aside from finding the graphic of a Sith Lord version of Harry Potter (which is pretty pathetic, if you think about it for more than five seconds), I started to look around at some of the stories and what not they were advocating or discussing. I found most of the stories advocated at that time (this was many, many months ago) were one step up from Angry-At-The-World-And-Really-Poorly-Written twelve-year-old deviant fantasies. Some people like that, otherwise it wouldn't exist in the first place, and while I may not agree with the “w00t!” and “awesome” attributes tossed on said stories, they are opinions, and we all know what can be said of opinions and people.

Then, on a lark, I decided to see if Echoes had been discussed on the site. It immediately came up in their search system, labelled under “Rubbish” or some such, which I found interesting as well. No stranger to criticism, good, bad, or even poorly structured, I wanted to



see what was said about the story. Someone started the thread by posting a pointer to Echoes with a “take a look” suggestion. Almost immediately, someone else posted a reply about how Harry was running around with martial arts and Japanese swords, and from there it turned into a flame-fest. What was the crux of the complaint? Most of the commentary came from people that said they (a) did not read the story; (b) could not be bothered to read the story; and (c) based on the simple fact that a sword was used, and/or martial arts skills, they cast much aspersions upon my abilities as an author, my knowledge of anything, and so forth -- frequently by accusing me having knowledge solely gleaned by being a fan of the very things I pointed out in my prior A/N.

For the record, the lot of you are very amateurish at criticism. Try going through the peer-review process for IEEE JSSC publication, or a top-tier conference like ISCA. You’ll learn how to really be critical and selective, but with brains.

I proceeded back to FicWad, and bluntly told the people “suggesting” (all but demanding in some of the PMs I received) that I post at DLP exactly what I thought of DLP based on the commentary that had already been posted there on Echoes. I further made it clear that I would never post there, and stop “suggesting” I do so.

Did this stop it? Of course not. Not only at FW (before I left the site for many reasons, this being one of them), but also here at FF, I continued to receive comments either via review or PM to go post there. Or drop the HG aspect. Or whatever.

For anyone who has actually read this story, you’ll recognize that I have a very low threshold and tolerance for stupidity. I have failed kids in the college courses I have taught for less stupidity than what I have received over these issues, and it astounds me that people are dumb enough to think that they can “suggest” what I do. In that same vein runs the entire premise of your DLP site.

To put it in words anyone can understand: Whoa, dude, I read a few fanfic stories where (X) is a complete wimp, pushed over by others, crazy psycho, slut, and/or is a total loser. I can’t read any stories with (X) as a character. (X) is such a pathetic person. I’m going to be a

close-minded ignorant fool and spew my dislike of (X) based on non-canon crap I didn't like reading in the first place, but for some reason, had to read every story I hated in its entirety. I even sought out more stories in the same bad model for (X) because I just couldn't stop myself. In fact, not only do I hate (X) for no valid reason, but I will actively encourage others to feel the same, flame people that suggest otherwise, and in general act like a three-year-old with a tantrum. Further, without any true personal knowledge of a topic such as martial arts, scuba, aerospace engineering, solid-state circuits, philosophy, literature, or foo (collectively "Z"), I'm going to make fun of anyone that tries to write with (X) because I embrace my ignorance and seek to only spend time and resources on people that mimic my biases and narrow mindset. I'll do so by pointing out how (Z) must have come from my ignorant imaginings of reality, rather than what any author might actually know from decades of hard work and study.

Clear enough? So we come to the point where by the time Chapter 25 was going live, I was sick and tired of the crap rolling in through both PMs and reviews, anonymous or otherwise. Sure, some were polite, but quite a few were not. I posted the A/N on Ch25 as a warning shot not to perpetuate the stupidity and crap, with clear examples of what I felt to be in such loose labels. It was very carefully crafted to impart the maximum offence possible into people inclined toward such stupid acts, and it worked perfectly.

The response has been, shall I say, amusing. At this point, I'll further point out that I've disabled PM communications and anonymous reviews.

Now, for those who think angsty prepubescent commentary is limited to those who happen to chronologically be in that window of time, I invite you to read some of the incredibly stellar and amazing reviews that warning A/N generated. I believe you'll find the bulk of the DLP crowd and their fans to be exactly as described in my A/N, regardless of what delusion they may have based on some quantity of months passed since first gracing the world with their indubitable superiority. Great way to show exactly the stereotype I was aiming for, kids.

The only way to show you are not what I have so simply described is by your actions. You can rant and vent all you like, but your words

have no value. Actions, for the most part, are the only things that are meaningful and indicative of a true nature. Go read those lovely reviews, and tell me how proud you are of your actions.

A few reviews in specific deserve some additional commentary.

“Lord Ravenclaw”, you may be a co-founder, and find my comments unpleasant, but here’s the basic rub of the situation: you know this crap happens on your forums, you make no effort to rein it in, and therefore you implicitly agree with, condone, and proactively support it. I should care what you think precisely why? Your entire website is no different from any other hate-speech based activity as far as I could tell at that time, and there has been no demonstration here to show otherwise – and this is entirely based on empirical evidence.

The only person out there to actually try to formulate a coherent argument for disliking Ginny, in particular, based on canon alone was “hb2”. (I owe you another reply to your last comment, btw. I’m waiting for some info to get back to me first to see about people worth training with in the area.) Even then, he admitted that it was a weak formulation, and was based primarily on other issues. The rest of you? Go back and re-read this A/N or the A/N on Ch25.

And finally, no, I’m not going to “go over” to DLP and discuss this. That would require visiting a site that supports many principles that I do not agree with, and frankly find very repugnant. The collective mentality there that I observed is no different from gay-bashing, jew-bashing, or any other isolation of a group. You lot are welcome to think what you want, so long as you stop harassing me (and others) with your little jihadlings. It’s annoying, and only serves to make my point in the long run.

Keep your biases and ignorance on your site, and stop trying to infect others with your disease.

## Chapter 27: Ashes

. . . where the wand is a tool to simplify the use of magic and the development of initial skills on the slow trek to mastery of core use. While general-purpose wand-less magic is possible, the unfocused and unpredictable results attained by such efforts relegated it to a curiosity rather than a preferred mechanism millennia ago.

The wand was introduced prior to 1550 B.C., as evidenced by fragments of texts found that were composed to Amenhotep IV in the ancient Egyptian empire. The Egyptian hieroglyph corresponding to 'Pharaoh' was replaced with a new variant that had a clearly depicted wand at the bottom of the symbol [pr-3, though the common Muggle interpretation is a pillar of support. The sudden rise of the wand among the Pharaoh class, frequently depicted in portraits using a rod or short staff of judgment, is an unsurprising development. The ruling Pharaohs were oft rumoured to have supernatural powers as direct descendants of the gods, which leaves open much speculation as to the source of wands or the veracity of magical bloodlines dominating in that ancient culture. Sadly, all known records that would reveal the exact sequence of events that influenced the development of the modern wand were lost when the library at Alexandria was destroyed in 673 A.D during Global Goblin Insurrection IX (see *L'Histoire Contemporaine de la Magie: Les Conquêtes Mondiales*, by E.C.).

Wands are fundamentally made up of two discrete compounds, which combine to make a powerful instrument for any magic-using individual. Either compound alone can be observed to have an impact on the flow of magic, but the combination of the two makes a unique tool that is quite sensitive to the energy it receives from a magic-user. The exterior of the wand, a carefully selected wood from one of a few types of tree, acts as a shepherd for the magic energy released by a user. The wood is a powerful attractor, drawing the released energy to it much as a magnet draws the iron filings from a shop floor. As the wood gathers the magic released, it focuses it into the inner part of the wand. This region contains a so-called core, which is actually an extracted substance from a powerfully magical species (e.g., dragon heartstring or unicorn tail hair). This inner material, encased in the wood exterior and suspended in a magically inert mix of other compounds, is the buffer that blends the discrete particles together. It

is shaped with the surrounding casing to discharge the combined flow through the tip of the wand. Breaking the shape of the core is catastrophic to the functioning of the wand, although cores that are not irreparably damaged may be transplanted to a new wand.

As with everything in life, natural affinities exist in wands as well as wand-cores. The different types of wood are better at collection for different types of fundamental magical particles. Each wood type is better or worse at collecting some combination of magic energy, which in turns lends a particular type of wood being more useful for some classes of magic than others. Similarly, the wand-core also has an affinity, and the wandmaker must balance the natural affinity of the core to the affinity of the wood casing. When a balanced wand is created, it will confer the property that any use of the specific blend of magic it is best suited to for is a pleasant, low-effort burden upon the wand-wielder. Unfortunately, the inverse is also true – for those tasks or magic uses that require a different signature of energy patterns, the wand acts as a mild resistor to the flow of energy. This, then, is the source of the widely believed myth that “the wand chooses the wizard.” The reality is that the distribution of conduits in a magic-user predisposes the user to a certain range of wand materials and cores of particular facility in use, where the lowest resistance pairing between user and wand may be found. For completely untrained children that pick up a wand, the leakage of energy from their core is more than sufficient to test the match by merely holding a wand and waving it about. Although a poorly matched pair may produce unpredictable results, a well-matched pair becomes obvious as the wand amplifies the leakage for the matching magical energy patterns in those lacking conscious control over their core. This is commonly witnessed in a tangible aura as the core is suddenly drained, manifesting the energy about the wand, including but not limited to effects such as glowing or shooting sparks.

Those magic-using species that lack wands (e.g., house-elves, goblins, dragons) contain within themselves their own form of magical focus – the very focus that wands use in their core. Through extensive research, it is apparent that the wand cores are just as potent – if not more so – in the living form than in the prepared form found at shops around the world. The secondary consideration is that many such species also have a particularly dense concentration of

conduits at key locations, allowing for the shaping of a magic focus through constructive spatial interference patterns. This allows more precise control than that which humans may attain without a wand but frequently lacks the precision and fine adjustment that can be demonstrated with a wand. It is critical to note that wands are not superior tools by any means – they are tools, and tools alone, no more and no less. Conceptually, any species may develop wands attuned to the conduit density, placement, and signatures representative of that species.

The obvious corollary to wands and their affinity is a direct result from the observation that wands concentrate and focus magic, allowing more precise control and targeted applications. That wands exist and that their naturally occurring materials behave as stated imply there also must exist those naturally occurring substances that are the antithesis of wands – magical disruptors, in effect. Such disruptors parallel both wand woods and wand cores and cause a variety of effects from diffusion of focused magical energy all the way to so-called ‘grounding rods’ or ‘lightening rods’ that . . .

. . . Excerpt from Theory of Magic, Volume II: Classical Training, Section III: Teaching Fundamentals, edited by R.J.L.

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. . . and the culmination of GGI IX led to the short-lived rise of Childeric II, the unified ruler of the Merovingian Franks. The misplaced common belief is that the destruction of the irreplaceable and vast magical knowledge of the Library at Alexandria symbolised the end of global magical insurrections, as many species lost centuries of specialised knowledge with the library's destruction.

A second source for this commonly reported misconception that GGI IX was the last global uprising of the goblins lies in the simple fact that it was by far the most expansive and globe-encompassing series of battles. Scholars, however, have shown that GGI X was a short-lived but fierce re-hashing of the principles behind GGI IX, spanning the winter of 983-984 A.D., starting with the fall of Otto II. The last thousand years of goblin-human conflict history demonstrate regional

problems and hotspots only, easily traced to localised political phenomenon such as . . .

. . . Excerpt from Contemporary History of Magic: Global Conquests, Years 230BC – 984AD, by E.C., translated by R.J.L.

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Sat, 16 Sep 1995

“Good morning, Harry,” the familiar voice called from far too near.

Harry buried his head in the pillow, willing the blankets to block his ears and make the message quite clear to leave him alone. When no sounds of an unwanted body leaving the room came, he swore silently. “What d'you want, Remus?”

“That's not quite right, Harry,” the voice responded.

Harry's mind suddenly caught up to his physical consciousness. He was awake far more thoroughly than if he had been doused in cold water. “Err, right, Floppy. Just to repeat myself, that's damn annoying of you.”

“I'm still willing to change,” the Hat offered in tones that mimicked Umbridge perfectly. “There are several good choices,” the Hat said, switching seamlessly in mid-sentence to Ginny's overtones, “depending on your mood, I should think.”

“Must you?” Harry had put up with the Hat talking like Remus every time they were alone the previous day, and it had slowly driven him crazy. He was tempted to put in the effort to master ignoring the voice of his friend, but that would only lead to complications in other ways. In all, when Harry had vented abruptly at Floppy, the Hat had obliged him by switching to the commandeering voice of Hermione Granger, verbally sparring with him as he moved about the castle. All he tried to do after that was get everything unimportant done before the weekend started and not destroy the Hat in retaliation – assuming such was even possible.

“If it is the means to being able to hold a conversation,” the Hat said, switching back to Remus' voice, “then yes, Harry, I must.”

Harry needed to go back to training regularly, and all the little diversions that appeared to come with being in the castle were severe impediments to his old preferred lifestyle, not to mention the diversion of a Hat that was trying to be conversational. The Granger Voice, as Harry thought of it, had been far too perfect for piercing his composure given how the girl was stalking him, threatening to show him who knew more esoteric hexes if he failed to rescind his little charms work on her possessions. She had been convinced that she successfully neutralised his spells, only to find all of her school-work related possessions abruptly moved to Ginny at eight o'clock sharp. Harry had heard the quiet speculation of his demise long before Hermione found him, Ron in tow, and made her desires more than clear. Having received a rather thorough beating in hand-to-hand combat from Master Gata earlier in that same afternoon, Hermione's threats had left Harry curt and cold to the couple.

“Remind me when I die to kick Gryffindor's arse for his overly clever party hat tricks,” Harry muttered as he crawled out of bed and gathered his towel for a shower and the morning hygiene ritual. If his wake-up call was going to be representative of the day, he was faced with what could only be described as a test of endurance.

It was only when he reached for the towel after his shower that he discovered just how long the day was destined to be. Before he could use his oversized, thick, white terry-cloth towel to dry off, there was an abrupt pop!, and he was faced with a fluffy white lemming that was chittering excitedly. A fluffy white lemming with weak brown stripes that was approximately fifty times larger than any lemming that had ever existed naturally. Before he could fully process what had happened when he had reached for the towel, it looked at him and, in a bright, squeaky voice like a record that was spinning too fast, cried out, “I love Harry Potter!”

In the heartbeat that it took for him to process the words, his mind rapidly shuffled through the names of everyone that might have the



desire and the skill to do what he was witnessing. His mentors, of course, could achieve this, though he was under the impression that everything there was currently in a neutral state. A declaration of prank warfare was usually made quite clear with the first salvo, and so far nothing had been revealed. The next stop would be Hermione, particularly after the prior evening, but he was certain she lacked the means to pull this trick off in his heavily protected suite.

“Err, right,” Harry said to the lemming that was watching him avidly. “You're from whom?”

“I love Harry Potter!” it announced again in a squeaky scream, its too-fast voice bordering on an outright screech.

The various Weasley siblings were another possibility, and while he was hesitant to rule out the twins, he felt this was too sharp of an escalation after their earlier attempts. It was clear to him that they were slowly working their way up through the echelons of sophistication to evaluate Harry's skill level, considering there was no time limit on their mutual challenge. There was a possibility this was Ginny's next volley in her retribution plans, but the same problem came back to him – his suite was heavily protected.

“Harry's not here right now, may I take a message?”

“I love Harry Potter!”

The other logical choice was the Weasley matriarch, but he stumbled there at the same problem that Ginny, the twins, and Hermione were unlikely to solve: the mandatory interior access to the suite. The only added strength to the matriarch's possible status was the rather vague and suggestive short letter she had delivered earlier in the week.

“Make yourself useful, and get me a towel.”

“I love Harry Potter!”

Thankful for small favours, Harry was glad that Cyril was still out and about and had yet to return to their suite. No further communications had arrived from his Mentor, and the same absences were found among all of his cohorts at home. The only person he had been able to find the previous day was Master Gata, and the man had been more than happy with an impromptu extended training session. When Harry had mentioned during a brief lull that he was beginning to teach a friend the basics of the style, Master Gata's eyes lit up, and he proceeded to put Harry through a gruelling two-hour rehashing of the proper first and most fundamental techniques. Harry's muscles were still sore this morning.

“Bugger.”

“I love Harry Potter!”

Satisfied that the magic was limited to that one statement, Harry climbed out of the shower and tried to minimize the water dripping all over the floor. Reaching into the open shelving, Harry grabbed another white towel, only to have it pop! into another lemming that fell to the floor without an appreciable sound. “I love Harry Potter!” it squeaked out on landing.

The first lemming was not to be outdone by a rival and immediately chimed in again. “I love Harry Potter!”

The proclamation from the first lemming was sufficient to trigger the second lemming again. Harry immediately recognised the vicious cycle that had been set up and knew he wanted to avoid having any more of the annoying creatures show up. Two crying out their adoration for him in a non-stop back-and-forth session was annoying enough. Picking up his wand gingerly from the counter and pleased to not see it change into an annoying ball of fluff, Harry cast two rapid, silent Stunning Spells on the lemmings. As each spell hit, the lemming reverted back to a towel, albeit slightly scorched where the spell had impacted.

Sighing, Harry reached down to pick up the reverted towel, only to be rewarded with another pop! and “I love Harry Potter!”

“Dammit!”

“I love Harry Potter!”

Harry briefly wondered whether he was a latent seer of some kind before snorting in derision, earning another “I love Harry Potter!” declaration for his effort. He was able to touch the walls, the plumbing, the shelves, and the cabinets but not the towels. Looking across the counter, he spotted a container of tissues and grabbed one. When his fingers made contact, the top tissue turned into a very, very small lemming.

“Mi msmv mmsmk mkktrr!”

Harry knew what the words were, even if the voice was just barely in the audible range of humans – or perhaps dogs.

“Problem, Harry?” Floppy called out from the bedroom.

“I love Harry Potter!”

“Mi msmv mmsmk mkktrr!”

Sighing, Harry ignored the Hat and focused on what was different. He could touch the structures of Hogwarts but not the things inside Hogwarts. On reflection, he realised that was not quite strictly true – he could use his wand without it converting to a lemming, so there had to be a rhyme behind it all, since the reason was escaping him.

In some respects, Harry quite hated being in the castle. Everything was so inherently magical, there was a glow of magical auras everywhere, and tuning in to one specific aura was annoying if it lacked sufficient magnitude to stand out from the noise. He could see a radiant pattern around the towels and the tissues, but it was incredibly faint compared to the blocks comprising the walls or the shower facilities directly. It was less than clear if the magic was in the objects themselves or just leakage from surrounding objects.

His toothbrush, however, he knew was entirely Muggle. Reaching out to touch it, his suspicions were confirmed when a severely under-sized lemming, with rather spiky and messy fur, appeared, crying out, "I love Harry Potter!" faintly.

"I love Harry Potter!" the overly large lemming cried in response.

"Mi msmv mmsmk mkktrr!"

Three Stunners later, Harry was scowling at the remains of his partially melted plastic toothbrush and at the wisps of smoke coming off of the towel on the floor. The tissue had vaporised, apparently. He was almost sure he would receive a lecture from someone for defacing Hogwarts' bath towels.

Using his wand as a drying tool, he was at least no longer sopping wet or standing amongst puddles on the floor. However, it was a safe bet that he would never be able to get dressed, climb back into bed, or touch his beloved Muggle notebooks or pens and pencils. Repeated uses of Finite Incantatem upon himself and his surroundings changed nothing about his lemming problem, leaving him convinced he was subject to a potion of some sort.

At the same time, he knew that there was a finite amount of magical energy that could be routed in such a manner, given that he was not consciously directing his magic to perform these transformations, and thus it was quite limited. Therefore, if he waited for a bit, whatever it was should wear off – unless, of course, a spell had been attached to some truly obscure part of his body, as he had done to Snape. Harry was still mildly curious to know how Voldemort had ascertained the location of the multiple hexes that Harry had laid upon the dour man's nape hairs. It was convenient as a location that was nearly impossible to direct a Finite Incantatem at with any precision if trying it yourself, let alone the many hairs that were there. It was ideal as a location for latent hexes due to an interesting feature of human physiology, for the base of the neck contained a cluster of magical conduits there, virtually untapped to the unwitting. Placing a long-term hex there would ensure a lifetime of power to the hex and a very unlikely chance of removal.

The only obvious trigger with his current predicament seemed to be that non-magical items were transformed, and magical items were not. Moreover, application of magic to an item reverted the transformation. Opting to test the logical conclusion, Harry cast a benign Glamour Charm on one of the scorched towels, causing it to appear as though it was dark blue. Reaching out to touch it, he was pleased to find the towel had not transformed. The remaining problem was the sheer impossibility of navigating from his suite to any other place without touching something non-magical – including other students' possessions. Resigned to waiting out the hex, Harry moved to the chair at his desk after charming it to be flat black in appearance, carrying the towel with him. He would have to test the presence of the prank he was under every few minutes until it wore off. Sighing, Harry thought again about how long the day was likely to be.

“All right, Floppy, it looks like you've got a captive audience. What shall we talk about now?”

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It took just under two hours later by Harry's watch for the prank to finally wear off completely. That had ensured he missed the official breakfast period, but knowing how to get into the kitchens was a safe workaround. For once, Floppy seemed to pick up on his lack of desire to discuss anything serious, and he had to admit to enjoying a conversation about the personal quirks of the four Founders. It was amusing to think that Salazar had an incurable sweet tooth, to the extent he had his own personal house-elf that had only one job: bringing into the school every type of sweet that could be purchased throughout the world.

“You're not serious when you say that Rowena developed a charm just to remove the pits from olives, are you?” Harry asked as he finished getting dressed. “Muggles have been doing that for thousands of years.”

“Oh, very,” Floppy replied in his dry mimicry of Remus. “She always had a weakness for olives, especially the dark green ones properly

salt-cured, and being rather too hasty at one point, she nearly choked on one with the pit still in. After that, she was determined to find the fastest yet most accurate method to remove the pits from an entire container.”

Harry had to chuckle at the mental image of late nights, smudged parchments, and a hell-bent focus to develop a new charm. It would have been far too easy to just ask a house-elf to do it the Muggle way and clearly unsuitable that she might get her hands dirty doing it herself. “You wouldn’t happen to know the charm she developed, would you?” Harry could think of several uses for such a charm, and olives or fruit in general were nowhere in his visions. “Might be handy.”

“Sadly, no,” Floppy replied. “I was designed such that I cannot learn spells or repeat them to others.”

“Really? No spells at all?” Harry had a suspicion that the Hat was less than honest on that score.

“With one exception, yes,” Floppy offered. “You’ve asked previously about how I was created. That is the exception, but there are rules governing with whom I may discuss it.”

“Rules, eh?”

“The rules were part of my construction, and it’s literally not possible for me to express them.”

“Did I mention that I want to smack Godric around when I die?”

“I’m almost certain there will be a queue, Harry. For him and for you.”

As Harry approached the exit to the suite, his stomach complaining slightly at the lack of sustenance, he was stopped by the slight murmur of voices on the other side of the portrait-door. There was nothing particularly threatening or ominous, but it was the first time he could recall hearing multiple voices near the door. The complete lack

of a peep-hole through the doorway was something he had failed to note previously, but now he was wishing he had installed some work-around to achieve that result.

Cracking the door open, Harry saw one of the twins moving about in the hall, wooden implements in hand, and he could easily surmise the other voices belonged to the usual suspects. Harry slid through the opening and quietly closed the door behind him, careful to avoid stepping into the hallway cluttered with things. He was amused to see Fred, George, Ginny, Ron, Hermione and Neville industriously working with the fairly simple but strange things.

“Right, now the powder, George,” Hermione called. She held something that looked rather suspiciously like a clipboard and was making notes on it as people moved about. All the signs were there that this was Hermione's show, and the rest were the assistants or hangers-on.

Looking about, Harry saw that they had set up a grid of small round discs with the equivalent of a sole chopstick sticking up from the centre. Bits of what looked like brightly coloured string connected each rod to the four nearest neighbours. To his eye, it appeared that the distribution should have been a square grid with two feet per square side. Interestingly, however, the arrangement formed a compressed parabola with a tangible focal point some three feet in front of the portrait-door to his suite. The open space was more than sufficient room for someone to stand in front of the door and open or close it. Beyond that area, the squares became less and less distorted until they were unskewed to the naked eye.

As he moved quietly to stand in the centre of the open space before the door to his suite, he saw George heft a bag of clear white powder and begin shaking it in a light layer across the floor. The redhead was moving in a careful pattern to avoid making any tracks in the powder he was spreading.

“Are you sure this will work?” Ginny asked as her brother continued to put powder everywhere. Harry had to suppress chuckling as

George casually sauntered right past the open space, easily within touching distance, and the powder fell harmlessly to the floor.

“It's Fidelius protected, you said,” Hermione muttered absently, making marks on her clipboard. “We can't consider getting around that until we know where the Fidelius is.”

Ron was watching Hermione warily from what Harry could tell, but the twins were just grinning at each other and grinning maniacally. “And then we hit paydirt!” Fred echoed.

“Has anyone seen Harry since last night?” Ron asked to no one in particular.

“No,” Ginny replied immediately. “He was supposed to meet me at breakfast, but he never showed up.” Harry winced at that, knowing he needed to apologise for missing the meeting. He would need to think up a suitable half-truth excuse to avoid giving any ammunition or openings to the girl.

“Probably off tormenting some poor soul,” Ron said as George finished spreading the powder across the floor.

“Nah,” Neville said with a faint smile, “I'd bet he's much more skilled than mere tormenting.” Harry had to hand it to his new friend, for Neville seemed to have a way with words.

Hermione shot a brief glower at Neville. “Right, Fred, George, to your places.” Harry leaned up against the portrait-door as Fred and George both moved up against the same wall he was on, forming a large triangle to his view with Hermione at the apex vertex. Each boy was stationed some ten feet to his right or left, and they were looking at each other in a way that Harry could only describe as through his own body. He knew they should have their vision blocked, but the faces they were making at each other made it clear that they could see just fine.

For reasons completely outside of Hermione's apparent plans to explore the limits of the Fidelius Charm, Harry was fascinated. With



Remus and Nicolas, he had tinkered a few times with the Fidelius and any methods in which it might be breached, but they had never done a systematic study of the way the magic behaved. When Nicolas told them it was impossible to break, they took his word for it and moved on to other aspects of the Charm.

“Neville, Ginny,” Hermione said brusquely, “you too.” The indicated duo split apart and moved to stand half-way between Hermione and one of Fred or George, respectively. It was obvious she was setting up a multiple reference-point perspective to try to isolate any deviation in the perceived space. It was a clever idea, but given how the grid on the floor was laid out, Harry could tell in advance that it would fail.

“Ron,” Hermione said, “start walking.” Her boyfriend said nothing but just moved to the first chopstick contraption on the floor. As soon as he arrived, Hermione made a mark before looking up. “Everyone can see Ron, right? Nothing looks odd, right?”

Ron stepped over a string to the next chopstick station following the chorus of dutiful ‘yes’ answers. It was tedious to watch, which meant Harry knew Ron was annoyed to be doing it, but the outcome was fascinating. It made no difference whether Ron was in the region of distorted squares or the larger area of proper squares, everyone said that they could see him and that it appeared he moved the proper distance each time.

“Right,” Hermione said when he was finished. “That's the first pass. We confirmed what Ginny had previously tried and told us. It doesn't matter where you are. It looks like there's nothing wrong or missing. Ron's footprints match the grid in the air.” Harry was not surprised to hear that Ginny had been casing the suite he was living in. He knew she wanted the Map back. “Ron, back to the beginning. Everyone remembers the spell I taught you last night, right?”

This time, as soon as Ron arrived each of the others cast a quick spell and then reported the distance from Ron to them one at a time. Harry was intrigued. He had no idea a magical measuring spell existed. Hermione dutifully wrote it all down, nodding at each

response. Ron then proceeded to the next point in the grid, and Harry was very curious to know how this scene was going to play out. Hermione said nothing as the data continued to roll in, but Harry could tell she was becoming excited over something.

When Ron's second pass was complete, Hermione smirked in obvious triumph and held up a sketch for everyone to see. Harry could see little numbers all over it, but more than that, the sketch was a very close approximation of the variably compressed parabolic distribution in the grid that he saw. The grins all around among the co-conspirators were well earned in his opinion.

Placing her clipboard on the floor where she was standing, she strode directly towards Harry, and for a moment he was convinced she would walk through the protections. When she abruptly sat on the floor, holding her nose and crying out, Harry was surprised. For all intents and purposes, it was as though she had walked into a solid wall, though Harry knew nothing was there in reality. Ron was at her side in a blink, and the others gathered around shortly after.

“Help me up, Ron,” she commanded, one hand still holding her nose. “I should have expected that. Honestly, sometimes I'm just too dense.” As the others backed away while she made shoo-shoo gestures, Harry watched her pull out her wand. She turned her back to him and measured the distance to her clipboard. Then she turned back towards Harry and measured the distance to the wall. “Well, we know it's here now, and we know the volume that hides it. I'm not sure what to do next, though.”

Fred, however, was apparently not dismayed in the least. “Allow me, Hermione,” he said grandly, scooping up a handful of the white powder on the floor. With a casual toss, he threw it straight at the wall in front of Hermione, where it impacted visibly and slowly slid down, leaving white powder hanging, suspended in space from Harry's point of view. It was amusing and fascinating at the same time, though his hunger was making itself known again.

“Harry, you can come out now,” Ginny said calmly.

Everyone paused in their actions and swivelled to stare at the redhead. Harry went extremely still and tried to breathe as shallowly as possible.

“What are you talking about, Ginny?” Hermione's voice was sharp, but Harry could almost hear the resignation in it.

“Harry's over there somewhere.” Ginny pointed in a vague way at where Harry was, and he was amused to notice that she was close to dead-on accurate. “He has been for a while, though I just figured it out.”

Harry knew the game was up, but he had no idea how the end had come about. Ginny knew he was there, even though he was behind a Fidelius-protected location, but it took her time to realise it. Aside from Hermione's tricks to map out a Fidelius region, this was something else to contemplate on a whole new level of problem importance.

“Harry?” Neville asked after a moment. “Going to join us?”

Harry glanced up and down the hall and saw no one around. Moreover, he saw no arched doorways in this region – only the corridor walls, the Gryffindor portal portrait, and the portrait behind him were present as structural objects. Concentrating on it, Harry took a half-step and Disapparated with a sharp crack!

“You can't Apparate into or out of Hogwarts!” Hermione nearly screamed at him as he materialised right next to Ginny.

“Oh? You can't?” Harry said with as much indifference as he could offer. “I'm so sorry to hear that.”

Hermione was doing a credible impression of an outraged fish, while Neville was chuckling and the twins were regarding him with an evil eye. “No one can!” Hermione ground out slowly. “It says so in Hogwarts, A History.”

"I didn't get the memo on that, sorry," Harry said with a shrug. "Nice trick with the measuring thing, by the way." Ginny gave him a sly wink as Hermione immediately became full-fledged flustered. It was obvious that she had no idea how to react to the casual dismissal of the Apparition concept when coupled with a direct compliment from Harry about something she had done. "That really was brilliant, Hermione. What spell were you lot using anyway?"

Ron was eyeing Harry without an overt expression other than perhaps distrust on his face. Hermione's posture slowly settled back into a proper one, her face relaxing into at least a mask of normality as she regarded him with what calm she could. "I, err, made it up."

"Hmmm. Interesting." Harry successfully controlled his surprise, and he knew he let nothing show out of the ordinary at her statement. "We should compare notes on it later."

"Dumbledore was looking for you this morning," Neville said, neatly changing the topic. Harry made a mental note to get his friend a gift bag from Honeydukes or the like the next time he was out and about casually.

"With or without Slughorn?" Harry asked warily. After rejoining the school on Friday morning, the headmaster had introduced the new Potions professor during breakfast to much applause from the students. Harry knew that Slughorn was already circulating among the students at meals, making polite conversation with many but increasingly focusing on just a few students by the time dinner was over. To his irritation, the man kept after Harry, trying to get him to attend a private meeting.

Harry could find nothing particularly wrong with the new professor, but he was beginning to understand his Mentor's distaste for the fellow – it left you wondering about his real agenda when the man moved so effortlessly among so many different castes in the castle.

"Without," Ginny said promptly. "Where were you?"

“I had a bit of trouble sleeping,” Harry offered, thinking about Floppy's desire to wake him early. “So I decided to stay in a bit.” That was certainly true as well. “Sorry for missing our meeting.”

Ginny shrugged, but her expression made it clear she thought he was being less than forthcoming. “It was just breakfast, Harry. It wasn't like we were supposed to talk about something critical. Besides, Remus warned me you don't always get up early on the weekend.”

For his part, Harry hoped his expression was still one of calm and normality. First, he was unsure how much of what she was doing Ginny had revealed to the others. Using Remus' name in an off-hand manner suggested she was not trying to hide anything. Second, he was now debating whether this morning's fun was a result of Remus or the Weasley matriarch. It was a little too coincidental that Remus should point out a warning like that, only to have a prank show up so soon. “Sometimes,” he agreed blandly before turning back to Hermione. “So, you know the proximal location of the suite entrance. What's next on the agenda?”

Silence was his reward, which only caused Harry to chuckle lightly. “Right, I'm not taking you through the Fidelius, and I couldn't even if I wanted to. Carry on, then,” Harry offered with a wave as he left the group behind. “I'll expect a report on your success later. And don't forget to clean up, or Mrs Figg will be after you.”

Harry thought a light snack from the kitchens followed by a moderate training session would be the best way to re-start the day.

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His trip to the Great Hall for lunch was interrupted when he spotted a large notice board in the Entrance Hall. It was all but literally wallpapered with posted notices of laws, regulations, and specialised meeting notices. At first, Harry wanted to laugh outright at the volume of effort Umbridge or her cronies had to put in to get this installed and up-to-date. As he started looking at some of the titles, however, he just wanted to sigh.

Edgar had been particularly silent lately, and Harry was looking at two very new notices that clearly defined the Hogwarts High Inquisitor, the powers ascribed to said position, and a notification of Umbridge being ratified to fill the post pro tempore and exclusively as a proxy for the Minister of Magic, who could overrule the pro-tem proxy on any actions. Moreover, her powers would include enacting suitable punishments and rewards for those that hindered or helped her in her duties.

Given the posting dates, Harry realised that one week from that day would see the High Inquisitor fully entrenched at Hogwarts. Or rather, as entrenched as the Minister wanted her to be. Harry was a bit disappointed that Edgar had failed to neuter these as well, but he knew that was a trick that they had to be careful in using. Moreover, he saw a notice posted that the Ministry of Magic was formally filing a challenge to the ICW governing body about matters pertaining to jurisdiction, jurisprudence, and of all things, *jus ad rem* conflicting with *jus naturale* and *jus cogens* when framed in *jus soli*. The last notice was full of double-speak and innuendo but boiled down to a thinly veiled challenge to the ICW for the legal status of a minor protected by international convention rather than local convention, and the logical paradox such a situation creates given that a minor cannot declare any citizenship other than that of the parents. Reading between the lines, it was very likely that the minor involved was him, and the objective was to strip him of the jurisdictional protections conferred by the limited War Mage status he held.

While it was a bold move, Harry suspected that the only way to get around the ICW rules and regulations was to attempt secession. Such an act would be historical, in that no one had ever tried, but also rather doomed in the end, as the ICW had at some point enacted allegiance oaths for handling “rogue” nation-states that were not party to the ICW. The human magical folk in England would find magical trade severely scrutinised and hampered, ultimately leading to pressure on the Ministry to stop being silly. In the short run, however, even a temporary cessation of observance over the ICW statutes would be very complicated to work around. Harry was aware that on some level, he was poking the dog's owner with a sharp stick when he dealt with Umbridge, but surely no one would think his annoyances rated such a drastic move. Until he could talk to Edgar,

he knew that the real story behind these moves would remain a mystery.

With a sigh, Harry entered the Great Hall, ignoring the whispers and stares that followed him where he went. Dumbledore was sitting at the Head Table again, though his left arm was out of sight as it had been ever since his “release” from the infirmary. Harry dropped into the seat next to Ginny, aware of McGonagall watching him closely. Knowing what her stare was likely to be about, he gave her a faint shrug and tried to put on an expression of “I tried” on the Umbridge issue. He thought he received a faint nod in response before the professor turned away and began talking to Flitwick.

Ginny nudged him sharply in the side, and when he looked back to see what the problem was, he caught her gesture to the short woman in hideously pink attire striding toward him. Inwardly, Harry groaned, thinking that the day just kept getting longer no matter how much time went by.

“Mr Potter, how nice to see you joining us,” Umbridge offered in a tone that conveyed all pleasantries. “And how are you today?”

Knowing that she was leading up to something, Harry kept his expression neutral. “Still alive, Arts Madam.”

Her smile flickered ever so slightly before she glanced at those sitting around him. “So I see, Mr Potter. Did you see the new notice board?”

Knowing what she was after now, Harry gave her a dry smile, knowing how it would irritate her. “It's kind of hard to miss.” Harry casually began pouring himself some juice before gathering various fruit to his plate, doing his best to ignore the woman standing across from him.

“You did us a service, Mr Potter,” Umbridge said sweetly. “We were neglectful in posting those notices. I must say, there were all kinds of interesting things I learned reading through them. You might find them interesting as well.”

The casual phrasing was cultivated to pique his interest, but Harry knew all but three of the proclamations from prior discussions with Edgar. Two of the new ones pertained to the High Inquisitor, and the last was the ICW challenge. She was hinting at the ICW challenge more than the others, as there would be no surprise in the Inquisitor papers, but he also knew that she was unaware of his knowledge about the other things.

“Perhaps,” he agreed, never looking away from the apple he was slicing up. “It’s always amusing to me how much effort the Ministry spends trying to renege on its promises and agreements, so maybe I’ll read those notes for a laugh or two.”

As the silence stretched out, he finally looked up to see Umbridge glaring at him, her squat face flushed. Hermione was leaning ever so slightly away from the vicinity of Harry and Umbridge, her face pale. Abruptly, Umbridge turned away from him and gave her beady eyes free roam over his companions. “Miss Weasley, I shall expect you in my office next Saturday morning at nine o’clock. Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, Mister Longbottom, each of you will follow Miss Weasley thirty minutes after each other. Work out the schedule yourselves, but if any of you are late, you’ll all spend a week in detention with me. Is this clear?”

After she received some form of acknowledgement from everyone, she stalked off to the Head Table, leaving Harry to exhale slowly. “Sorry, people,” he offered quietly. He was going to have to explore ways to neutralise if not outright neuter the Inquisitor before she could inflict too much damage.

Ron was staring angrily at the table, but his words were quiet. “And Ginny just got free of the hag, too.”

“Ginny?” Harry tried to ask what was going on with the one word.

“I’ve been in detention every night, Harry. I finished it last night.” She did not turn to look at him; instead she busied herself with scooping roast chicken and vegetables onto her plate.



From her blatant behaviour, he could tell she had no desire to talk about it, so he just changed the topic instead. "So I take it that I didn't miss anything at breakfast other than Dumbledore?" Harry speared some of the same roast chicken that Ginny had helped herself to, happy to be eating something solid for a change.

"Not much," Neville offered. "Just Umbridge announcing the notice board, and Hermione here conscripting us into Fidelius-breaking boot camp."

The eye-roll at the end of his statement made Harry chuckle a bit, but Hermione ignored the byplay. "Ginny has something for you," she announced instead.

"Oh? I was going to ask about your progress in the corridor, but what's this about?"

Ginny looked puzzled for a moment before she nodded swiftly. "Yeah, bit weird. I got a letter that asked me to hand something to you . . ." Her voice trailed off as she dug into her pockets for a moment. "I thought it might be from one of your, err, friends, as I didn't recognise the writing. I assume they all know you're not allowed to get mail directly now."

Harry took the parchment after putting down his fork and knife, absently washing down the chicken with pumpkin juice. Flipping the very thick tri-folded note over, he saw where a seal had been broken and that there was handwriting on the outside.

Ginevra M. Weasley

Gryffindor

It took a moment for it to register, but Harry knew that handwriting. He knew it, and suddenly everything in his stomach was lead. "Harry?" Ginny's voice was distant to his ears, but he could tell she was acutely worried. Opening the first fold of the letter, he saw that another seal, which had not been broken, protected the second and

third folds in the parchment. The same handwriting had neatly scribed a short note on the top of the parchment.

Dearest Ginny,

I know you're very friendly with our mutual acquaintance, your Mr Potter. I also know he's not supposed to directly receive mail at the moment. Would you be so kind as to pass this letter to him?

I look forward to the day when we might be introduced.

Until then,

TMR

Harry's lingering appetite was long gone, and his hand was betraying his mental control by showing the very faintest of tremors. The remainder of the parchment was still sealed and contained a lingering trace of magic, but not enough to be anything of concern. As though he was a dispassionate observer from across the table, he watched his other hand break the second seal and unfold the remainder of the letter.

The primary filler of the remaining space on the parchment he saw was from a magical Impression Copy Charm that had been applied to a Muggle newspaper article, with a short hand-written note underneath. The article was fairly brief, obviously from a back page given the narrow column width, but Harry knew it was not going to be a positive thing, no matter what his opponent's prior claims might have been.

Parole Granted

Today, Vernon and Petunia Dursley received full parole from their sentence, imposed nearly ten years ago, for the neglect and abuse of their nephew. In prior hearings, discussions of their past actions coupled with their lack of true remorse led to parole denials. When the issue of their past acts was not raised this year, the Parole Board psychologist decided that the Dursleys were no longer at risk for repeating their behaviour.

“Their sentence of fifteen years was due to expire at the mandatory two-thirds sentence release date next year, so the early release by one year changes very little,” said Board member Edward Hughes. “They have been appropriately disciplined for . . .

Harry stopped reading, his stomach roiling. The handwriting across the bottom was short and to the point.

Do you consider this justice?

-LV

Ginny was tugging on his arm, trying to get his attention, and all he could see was an abattoir, bodies and carnage everywhere. He knew, as Cyril had warned him he would. The letter was a declaration of knowledge on so many levels that it simply staggered the imagination. Whom he was sitting with, whom he was friendly with, whom he spent extra time with, the punishments he received, and the status of things in the castle – he knew all of it. And had put his thumb across all of it.

“Harry?!”

Hermione's voice cut through faintly, and he realised Ginny was looking completely pale and all but sick herself. The people sitting around him were openly confused, but it was barely registering at any level. He could see Ginny, the glint in her eyes long gone from a Killing Curse. George with matted blood changing the red hues of his hair. Neville with a face distorted from the Cruciatus.

They were all dead, but none of them knew it yet.

Harry rose to his feet, ignoring the people around him, and quickly left the Hall, feeling as though everything were shifting. Somewhere he could feel anger building. Anger that the news imprint contained the content it did. Anger that Voldemort had access to such contemporaneous sources for news. Anger that he had lost two precious weeks of time to build connections and root out the

remaining problems, thanks to the aborted ambush outside the headmaster's office.

The orb arrived Wednesday morning, with a timing that was unsettling. The letter arrived Saturday morning and spoke of things that the other only implied. Yet new implications were carried along, more troubling implications.

Harry barely noticed the suit of armour that was blocking his path to the outside, and he flicked his hand out in irritation, sending the suit of armour flying to the third floor as he stormed onto the grounds, a faint clatter the only sound to accompany his exit from the castle. Harry knew he was still struggling to catch up with what Riddle was doing since the orb had arrived, and the addition of today's events just made things worse. Fleeting, he recalled the headmaster telling him at St Mungo's that his own actions had been too hard to keep up with, and a faint sympathetic feeling lodged in his head.

The ante was raised, the game well afoot, his own hand the only constant, and the discard pile precarious. He needed to find a new way to move, a way that would change the basis of the rules, for if he let Riddle continue to control the cards, he knew he would lose in short order.

He was paying no attention to where he was going, just that he was going outside, away from the castle, away from the damned. He had always thought that his own life was damned on some level, that he had somehow done something truly horrific in a prior life that he had to pay penance on with this life, but this – this was simply going too far. He knew coming to Hogwarts would let others find him, subjecting him to scrutiny from untrusted parties. He knew it was placing a target on the castle, but there was a target here regardless of whether or not he was present.

He needed to inform Dumbledore of this development, as well as the others, but they had agreed to delay resuming their official schedule until Monday. That meant that Harry needed to track the headmaster down this afternoon and play catch-up with events. He could almost imagine the arguments that would inevitably follow the revelation. And once again, Harry was confronted with the issue of how Riddle

knew of the Dursleys and how he had tracked them down, wherever they were. To Harry, that was a disturbing sign of functioning well in the modern Muggle world, which was something that he did not want to attribute to Riddle, since it violated far too many principles they had used as a basis for building their long-term plans. Muggle society had changed drastically since Riddle's last real interaction with it fifty years prior. Moreover, Riddle had no known supporters that would know how to track that information down for him. Damned twice over was still damned, and Harry felt a flicker of genuine hate for the situation he was in, that he had placed the others in.

Faced with the accuracy and timeliness of Riddle's knowledge regarding the goings-on inside the castle, Harry was further frustrated. It had been their belief that if he rapidly forced the exodus of those with connections to Riddle, there would be low risk directly from his presence for the remaining students. It would only be expected that he would develop casual friendships among people his own age, but no students would be high value targets for the other side – unless, of course, he did something to make them so. Romantic entanglements were ill advised, as was participation in any team or club activity. At the same time, consistent and public close camaraderie with anyone would be bad, which was why he worked with Ginny at unpleasant hours. Clearly, despite the very few meetings that he had shared with the redhead thus far, his effort had failed, unless Riddle was interested in her for some other reason. Her rather vague and misdirection-laden rationale for requesting his aid with training came back to him, and he wondered again about the root of her issues.

“Arry!”

A voice called out across the grounds, jarring Harry from his aimless stroll to the Forbidden Forest, one place he knew he could escape to and think in peace. Looking around, he spotted Hagrid waving energetically from the back of his cabin. He knew immediately that he should have disillusioned himself, but there was no avoiding the man now that he had been spotted. Trying to still the vicious cycle in his mind, Harry trudged over to Hagrid.

“Been wonderin' when yeh'd get 'ere, 'Arry!” Hagrid said with a smile. The big man paused for a moment before looking closer at Harry. “Yeh a'right there? Lookin' a mite peaked, I'd say.”

Harry shrugged, glancing at the oddly shaped object under some tarp behind Hagrid. “Had a bit of bad news, but I'll be fine,” Harry said quietly. The glint of what looked like a muffler sticking out jarred Harry's brain into wondering why Hagrid might have been waiting for him. “Err, is that Sirius' bike?”

Hagrid beamed at Harry, patting the bike with one hand. “Yep, I pulled it ou' jus' a li'l' while ago.” Harry smiled vaguely, hoping Hagrid would ignore his discomfort at the moment. “Knew ya wouldn' ferget, not fer Sirius.”

In a way, the opportunity to spend some time doing mechanical labour on the Triumph was appealing. It would give his body something to do, and he could either distract himself mentally with the chore or he could try to contemplate the new complication. At the same time, he felt guilty that he had, in fact, completely forgotten that they had discussed working on Sirius' old bike on the weekends. Since this was the first weekend since that conversation, naturally Hagrid would have been expecting him to come down.

“Actually, Hagrid, I'm sorry, but I did forget for a while there. I'm glad you reminded me, though.” Harry saw Hagrid was still smiling, so he hoped there was no harm done. “How about if we agree to do this every Saturday for a few hours after lunch, until it's done? Then you can go with me, and we'll give it to Sirius together?”

“That'd be fun, 'Arry!” Hagrid, if anything, seemed even more excited and happy. It was somewhat contagious, and Harry felt himself smiling a bit in response to the big man's enthusiasm and pleasure, even if he was still troubled.

“So where do we start?” Harry asked. He had a basic knowledge of how engines worked, any Muggle did, but he had no clue about how to go about repairing one, especially one that could fly.

Hagrid pulled an over-sized Muggle book out of his pocket, and Harry could clearly see the title as Chilton's Motorcycle Repair Manual, 1947-1976. Harry started laughing lightly, realising that Hagrid must have been planning this ever since they talked about it. "Got a Triumph section in there, does it?"

"Yep!" Hagrid said with a smile, flipping the book open and thumbing through it. "Thought th' gener'l stuff like cleanin' an' all was easy fer magic. We need t' get th' engine runnin' first."

Harry decided that this would, in fact, be the perfect diversion from everything. That would allow his subconscious to ponder things, his conscious to be engaged in a challenge, and his body to burn off adrenaline-induced energy. At the same time, he could get to know Hagrid better, for it was obvious the man would be a good friend to have.

"How've yeh been, 'Arry?" Hagrid asked as he started pulling other items out of a box. Motor oil, emery cloth, spark plugs, hoses, belts, and grease started the pile, while Harry was impressed at just how much the man had collected. "Not havin' problems after tha' with th' Orb, eh?"

"No, I've been okay," Harry said as he looked at some of the diagrams for how to take the bike apart. "It's all been rather crazy since I got here, so I shouldn't complain, you know? A good bit of it's my own fault."

"Maybe," Hagrid said as he wrestled with the tiny packaging holding a socket set together. "As far's I can figure it, though, ya never start th' trouble. Yeh jus' get sucked in once it's rollin'."

"Dumbledore told me I'd been making too many waves," Harry said after a moment, the book in his hands forgotten. "I didn't think anything of it until today, actually. I think I might understand what he meant a bit."

"E's like tha', 'Arry." Hagrid finally passed the package to Harry with a sigh, and Harry had to smile as he opened it effortlessly. "Ruddy

well hate those Muggle pack'ges, plastic everywhere an' fer tiny fingers. Yeh should know, Dumbledore came down 'ere this mornin' ter talk ter me. Wants ter get the 'old crowd' together, if yeh know what I mean."

Harry handed the socket set back to Hagrid and nodded briefly. "He's coming to terms with what's been going on, then. I was worried it would take more work to convince him that Riddle's active again, but events caught us up there."

"Great man, Dumbledore is," Hagrid said as he dropped to the porch floor with an abrupt squat, making everything tremble slightly. "'E's as human as th' next guy, but 'e's still great, always tryin' ter do th' right thing to th' very end."

Harry said nothing to that, for his own experiences were conflicting. "So where do you think we should start, Hagrid?"

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Some three hours later, Harry was hungry and tired but felt that they had made a solid start on the Triumph. The engine needed all new gaskets, for some kind of fungus had grown on anything soft. They had tried charming and hexing it off, only to wind up destroying the rubber washer they were experimenting with. Hagrid told Harry he had a friend that could get the parts, and Harry said he would cover the charges for it – although he had admitted they would need to wait a bit, as he was strapped for cash for a little while. Hagrid had simply said they would work out the balance in the end, and not to worry about it for now.

Standing outside the Hogwarts gates, Harry could feel the stress building back up after the calming time of working side by side with Hagrid. The big man had an easy demeanour, and it was surprising how effective he was at calming Harry down. It had taken little time for them to start laughing and joking, with Hagrid throwing in the occasional story about people from before – including Sirius – that Harry knew would become blackmail material in short order. Still, the diversion had been pleasant and relaxing, but now he was facing the real world situation again and all of the ugliness that entailed.



Harry had the uneasy recollection that lately, he had been lax in scanning himself for Tracking Charms. While not instantaneous communications, they could be risky under the wrong circumstances, even here when he crossed the threshold of the protections. With Dumbledore down and out for all intents and purposes, Snape and the hard-core known problems neutralised at the castle, and no one he could conceive of as a magical threat left, he had let his guard down. Given the letter sent to Ginny, he knew that he was going to have to reverse the trend and actually push it further in the other direction. With a sigh, Harry swept his wand in the collection pattern, simultaneously testing for and moving any Tracking Charm onto his wand. When it glowed brightly, Harry knew that swearing would be a pointless exercise. He had no idea how long it had been in place, who had placed it, or any of a host of other questions. Flicking the tip of his wand with a magical push, he transferred all of the charms onto the gates of Hogwarts.

Looking at the castle and thinking of the growing conversation he needed to have with Dumbledore later in the day, Harry was full of mixed feelings when he firmly covered his watch with his other hand and activated the Portkey home. Standing there and looking at the place he called home, he could tell it was empty. The overcast day that was brooding whether or not to rain made things dark enough that no one could read without lights, and there were no comforting nor welcoming lights in the windows.

While he would get to eat something and spend some time with Hedwig, he felt frustrated that his various mentors and co-conspirators were still out and about, doing whatever it was they were doing. He hoped for a letter inside but knew that it was likely a futile thought, as letters could be intercepted if they contained anything even remotely interesting.

“Problems, Harry?” Even Floppy's voice was subdued.

“No more than usual, Floppy. I'm sure you've realised something happened this morning.” Harry could hear the tiredness in his own voice, but he knew it was entirely a mental fatigue.

“Indeed, as it did with you on Wednesday morning. Would you be willing to share those memories with me?”

“Yeah, maybe. At least then you can write my epitaph accurately. Ask me again in the morning.”

“Very well, Harry. And I'll overlook your sarcasm for now.”

Harry had barely stepped toward the protections around the property when he saw Hedwig ghosting out of the tree she liked to roost in, heading straight for him. He smiled and held up his arm for her as he continued on toward the back door. “Hullo, girl,” Harry said as she alighted very gently on his arm and then shifted onto his shoulder. He reached up and began scratching around the edges of her head in all the places he knew she liked.

“Wish Remus would let you come with me to Hogwarts,” Harry offered casually as he swept through the door and locked it behind him. Turning on the kitchen lights, he began rummaging for a simple late lunch – leftovers, tea, and fruit. “Although I have to admit, I think I'm starting to agree with him that it's better for you here.”

Hedwig gave him a sharp nip on the ear for his comment, which was not entirely surprising when he thought about it for a moment. “It's not like that, Hedwig. You're safe here - well, aside from that accident last week. I think I'd be worried someone would hurt you to get to me if you were there, you know? I like knowing you're safe.”

Hedwig bit him again, though it was far gentler, and rubbed the side of his head with her own. “Yeah, I know, I miss you too, girl. I'd like to go flying again with you, but that's another one of those things that we can't do right now.”

Her bite this time was a little more painful. “C'mon, Hedwig, you know we can't unless the others are around. That's been a rule since we started playing tag and what not. We both get too distracted to pay attention to what's around us.”

Hedwig hooted softly and went back to nuzzling the side of his head. Harry suspected that, based on the number of his hairs she had removed through the years, she probably had a nest somewhere that was made entirely of Harry-hair. It was the kind of thought that was somewhere between nauseating and funny, but it was Hedwig in total. He kept threatening to look for it and bin it, but he knew that she knew he was never serious about it.

“Well, it's just us, Hedwig. The house feels empty when no one else is around.” Harry placed his meal on the table and sat down to eat. “Wish they'd leave a note or something.” The leftovers were a mix of Shepherd's Pie with some baked rolls, along with the two Winesap apples he had cut up. Hedwig was still preening herself and his hair when he finished, but that was mostly to be expected. “Caught any more of the sciurid, Hedwig?”

She hooted once sharply, which Harry knew was her way of saying you-are-being-silly-for-doubting-me. He knew that she had taken it as her personal mission to hunt them whenever she could, ever since they had taken to throwing acorns about. She had depopulated the homestead of them in short order, and Harry knew she was constantly expanding her search for others to deal with. They might be cute and fluffy, but to his girl, they were food. He supposed he might have a similar level of desire if he had been the recipient of a few thrown acorns as well. At some level, it was just the natural order of things.

After puttering around the house for a bit, Harry realised he was becoming increasingly edgy. He was uncomfortable staying in the empty house, despite the protections, since the only thing he had to distract himself was a biting Hedwig or his own thoughts, which were still too circular to be useful. Clearly far too soon for Hedwig's happiness, Harry said goodbye and activated the Portkey back to Hogwarts.

His mixed feelings were amplified as he passed the gates, and he found it odd that he was battling the urge to tell everyone to get the hell out at the same time as he had the urge to call in their allies and take the place over directly. It would be ridiculously easy to defend the castle for a group of people that truly understood what to do, but

at the same time, it would be incredibly stupid to keep so many liabilities around when they could just be booted out and sent home.

As Harry walked toward the lake, he tried to piece together a new way to look at the things going on around him. From the revelations during the first war he knew Riddle wanted the building, with a desire that could only be described as fanatical. Further, he knew that the fundamental reason for that desire remained unchanged. Therefore, it made no sense to think that Riddle would change that desire. Given that the castle was desirable, then it followed that Riddle would do nearly anything to capture it.

But the crux of the problem was that capturing the castle was insufficient. An invading group would have to capture it and then hold it long enough to subdue it. The magic inside the castle would be designed not to harm others but rather to protect them, and it would all have to be replaced for it to serve Riddle's needs. No one sane wanted to fight a two-front war, particularly a magical two-front war, for the outcome was almost always disaster as shown by the downfall of Grindelwald.

He found himself standing by the edge of the lake, watching the reflection of the overcast sky in the weak ripples of the water, trying to find a way forward. Riddle wanted something urgently, something that he was willing to risk exposure for after striving to remain hidden. Some few of his free followers had been moved to Azkaban, and the Dementors were still there, guarding them all – until Harry's foe summoned them to his side, at any rate. Another battle lost despite Edgar's best efforts was to replace the so-called guards with real guards, people who could communicate and use a level of sentience that would inhibit stunts like their "rescue" of Sirius.

He was still standing there when he felt a presence coming closer and turned slightly to see a familiar ghostly form floating nearby. "Potty, wee Potty," Peeves said quietly, "we is needing to settle scores."

"Really?" Harry tried to keep his tone casual as he looked about, making sure there was no one that could hear them. He was almost certain that they could be seen, for there would be people outside or

even looking out of windows, but being inaudible was sufficient. Harry quickly cast a Proximity Charm to be sure nothing sentient crossed into the audible region and looked back at the poltergeist. "What for?"

"Myrtle has been pestering poor Peeves," the figure murmured slightly. "Peeves has been good so far, but Peeves is not pleased with this."

"True, but how is it my fault?"

"Not mad Potty's fault, no, no," Peeves said with a bit of cackle. "But Potty struck a deal with the devil. Peeves is saying Potty needs to help, or Peeves has secrets to tell. Oh yes, secrets to tell."

"Why should I?"

"Peevesy knows that Potty knows how to control spirits, and Potty knows that Peevesy knows that."

Harry said nothing in response and watched the shimmering form for a moment. It was always dangerous to interact with an unpredictable agent of chaos, but in some ways, they were predictable. "All forms of request like this are based on barter, Peeves. You know that. What are you offering me for my aid?"

The Proximity Charm went off, Hedwig's hooting reminding Harry of what he had recently left behind. With a flick of his wand, it was cancelled, and he heard a voice that was hauntingly familiar behind him. "Peeves found you, Harry. I'm so glad; he was despondent when he couldn't find you earlier."

"Hello, Luna," Harry said without turning, "how have you been?"

"Oh, all's fair in love in war, Harry." Luna stood beside him, her head tilted at an outrageous angle as she regarded Peeves openly. "He doesn't really look surprised, does he?"

"Peeves has seen it all," the spirit announced grandly. "All!"

“No one doubts that,” Luna said calmly before she turned to Harry. “You know why, right?”

Harry found himself again frustrated since he had no idea on which level this conversation was taking place. Shrugging to Luna, he focused on Peeves instead. “What payment?”

Luna clapped briefly. “Oooh, are you negotiating so soon? I wanted to know the secrets everyone else does.”

“Peevesy offers one favour.”

Harry shook his head. “You want me to deflect Myrtle, which means a lot of work on my part. One promise.”

Luna smiled widely at Harry, and he could almost swear she was laughing at him inside.

“Peeves won't sell promises, no, no. Two favours?”

“Luna, is there anything you'd really, really like to know?” Harry knew this tactic would frustrate Peeves, but it would increase his own bargaining power.

“How to catch a Crumple-Horned Snorkack. I want to see if their nares really are in the shape of the lost Phoenix rune. I've always wanted to burn like that.”

Harry fought the urge to smile as widely as Luna was. She really was pretty, though her strange way of carrying on a conversation probably kept most people at arm's reach. “Right, Peeves, you have to deliver to us a captured, err, Snorkack, as well as give me two favours.”

Peeves was flying about in a tight circle around them, obviously agitated. “No, no, Peevesy won't, Peevesy can't, and it's not allowed! Four! Four favours!”

Harry sighed dramatically. “Right, then, four favours, no time limit.”

“Yes! Yes!” Peeves zoomed up and around their heads a time or two before he settled back down in front of them. “Mad Potty still owes Peevesy though, don't forget!”

Before Harry could say anything, the poltergeist left in a streak of silver, headed back for the castle.

“Peeves is selective with his secrets, Harry. Did you know that?” Luna asked.

“Naturally. He's a poltergeist, and his secrets are only as good as his desire to keep them. That's why I asked for a promise.” Harry chuckled for a moment. “They are bound by their promises, and it's hard to extract one.”

Luna's smile was comforting in some ways, and Harry found himself smiling slightly back at her. “But the promise has to be worded properly, Harry. Just making the promise doesn't mean you can't all but reveal the promise.”

Harry shrugged. “It's rather an academic question, isn't it? Or do you have a promise from him?”

Luna's smile changed not at all, but somehow he felt she was no longer quite so calm. “I only know of one promise Peeves has ever made, Harry.”

“Oh?” Harry reached down and ran his fingers through the water of the lake, enjoying the sharp coolness against his skin. Looking back up at Luna, he put on his best challenging I-dare-you expression. “What would that be?”

“You know that this is only just beginning, don't you?”

The tangent left Harry puzzled. He had been sure she was going to reveal something of merit for a moment. “Which beginning?”

“Every day is a new beginning and a new ending. You shouldn't take everything so personally.”

"It's not my ending I worry about." Harry went back to feeling the cool comfort of the water. "Or rather, it's not the act of ending, it's the aftermath."

"Yes, of course. The next great adventure is always waiting, but what of those who are not so lucky? Comfort comes from many places, if you only ask for it."

They were again in territory unfamiliar to his linear thinking, and he was unsure if there was a purpose to her tangents. "And yet, asking for something demeans the value. Were it offered freely and compassionately, it would mean far more."

"That's just silly, Harry," Luna said, sinking to her knees beside him, gently pushing the grasses at the edge of the water aside while she peered into the shallowest regions. "Is your pride too great to admit being human?"

"Who says I'm still human? I thought most people believed otherwise by now."

"If you think it will all be so bleak, perhaps you should do something about it, Harry."

"Talking to Ginny, are you?"

Luna laughed lightly, which surprised him a bit. "Not at all. I don't talk to my friends, Harry. I talk with them."

"Sophistry, from you?"

"You should try it sometime, Harry." Luna patted him on the shoulder in what he thought was a fairly patronising manner, but then her hand darted into the water and came back out slowly. He could see a small minnow swimming in the water she held cupped in her small hand. "It's not in the least bit magical like us," she said in a whisper, "but it knows everything it can know about life and has a magic all its own. Bleakness is a state of mind, not a state of being."



“Luna, just how much do you know?” Harry was unable to keep his sarcasm out of his voice, but given the wild tangents that always seemed to centre on a specific theme, he thought it was certainly a fair question.

“Do you find life fleeting, Harry?”

Harry stared at her for a moment before snorting. “Not today.” How right he had been when he feared it would be a long and drawn out day.

“How well do you remember your past?”

“What? In what way?”

Luna placed her hand back in the water, watching the minnow swim off while Harry watched her in turn. “Do you dwell in your past? Or is it fleeting, with the future spread out before you?”

“Err...” Harry had no clue where she was going with this line of inquiry, but she seemed to pay him no mind at all.

“Relativity is there, you know. The future is eternal, and the past is fleeting. That’s how it should be. You might want to try that, too.”

“Err...”

Luna stood up and smiled at him again. “You owe me a favour or a promise, Harry, but not a Peeves promise, when I ask it of you. In exchange, I’ll deal with Myrtle for Peeves. She likes me, you know, and is one of my three-and-a-half friends.” With an airy wave, she was gone as quietly as she had come, and Harry was still confused about what exactly they had talked about. Worse, he still had no idea what Luna knew and what she was merely guessing at. If Cyril wanted ‘new-think,’ however, Harry knew where his Mentor could find it in spades.

The sensation of discomfort in his thighs gradually intruded on his bemused mental state, and he realized he had been half-kneeling, half-squatting at the edge of the water for some time. With a mocking laugh at his own idiocy, Harry splashed some of the water on his face to try to force his mind back into gear.

As he took a step through the tall grass on the water's edge, however, his hand brushed several of the plants, and he was surrounded by a cacophony of pop! pop! pop! He drew his wand and fired the first hex before he even realised what was happening.

“I love Harry Potter!”

The phrase rang out from a series of nearly normal-sized lemmings, all vying with each other to make the words clear, all running over each other as each one's cry of adulation triggered the others to speak again.

“Dammit!”

Harry rapidly shot everything moving with a Stunning Spell and then tried to remain still. He then carefully applied a flat-black Glamour Charm to all of his clothes, just in case they decided to change and leave him starkers in the middle of the grounds. Disgusted with the prank that had come back for the second time with him still clueless, Harry stalked off to his suite, resigned to waiting out the two hours or so until the damn thing wore off. Maybe Floppy would have some further stories about the Founders to pass the time.

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“Well, Floppy, it looks like the thing has worn off again. Finally.” Harry could hear the annoyance in his own voice, but after just under three hours this time, he was hungry and cranky again.

“It did seem to go on quite a bit, didn't it?”

“I suppose. I’m not ready to draw conclusions yet, but I’m starting to get suspicious.” Harry was nearly certain now he was dealing with the Weasley matriarch. “I’d just like to make sure of it before I retaliate.”

“Until then, what next?”

Harry sighed and rolled over on the bed. “What Luna told me to do, I suppose.”

“She told you to do something? I don’t recall that part of your conversation.”

“Not in so many words, Floppy,” Harry pointed out slowly. “I think she was basically saying to accept the situation I’m in and move logically from there. That means training the others, as Ginny and all have been asking for – in some form or another. And, of course, I need to get that love-note to Dumbledore. I guess I should do that first.”

Heaving himself out of bed, Harry left his suite and went for the most direct path to the headmaster’s office. He had missed dinner again, but knowing his way to the kitchens would once more prove useful. There were a few students about, all of who gave him a wide berth and furtive glances as he moved past them, but that was fairly normal when taken in context. The gargoyle, however, seemed to be most unfriendly when he came to a stop in front of it.

“Ice mice,” Harry muttered. It sat there, not moving in the slightest, and glowered at him.

“Floppy, can you get this thing to move?”

“No, Harry. It responds to the headmaster or the password only.”

“Right.” Harry pulled out both wands this time, one in each hand. “Perhaps you’ve heard of what I did in response to the Fat Lady’s little display of non-support. I see three ways forward, Rocky. One, you move aside, I deliver my letter, and we’re all happy. Two, you’re reduced to rubble, I deliver my letter, and then you’re unhappy. Three,

you convince the headmaster or his phoenix to come down and personally take my letter – no one else will do. Then they're probably annoyed, but we're both happy. I'll give you to the count of five, and then you're going to be renamed Pebbles. One."

"Really, Harry, must you solve—"

"Two."

"—everything with violence?"

"Three."

Harry could tell Floppy was annoyed with him, but he was unwilling to take his eyes off the stone guardian.

"Four."

In a brilliant flash of fire, Fawkes stood on top of the gargoyle, his wings flapping once before he settled down slightly. The phoenix looked at Harry with his head cocked, and it left him thinking that the bird was laughing at him just as much as Luna had been.

Pulling out the letter Ginny had received, he held it out to the phoenix. "This arrived at breakfast, and I received it during lunch. He'll be able to figure out the rest from reading it."

Fawkes took the parchment, ruffled his feathers, and disappeared again in a flash of fire.

"A pleasure doing business with you, Rocky."

"You know, Harry, that wasn't particularly nice of you."

Harry was humming to himself, a tune that was from nowhere and just fit his mood of mild annoyance at the moment. "Floppy, I could have stood there guessing sweets or other cutesy phrases until I hit on the right one. Or I could have just blasted my way in. Instead, I made it clear I had an important message and left the choice up to

Dumbledore. We both know that he hears whatever someone says to that thing.”

“It’s not a very good one, but it is a point. I concede, at least this time.”

Harry came to a stop in front of the Fat Lady, who was giving him a rude hand gesture. “You know, this is a very familiar scene. You can open quietly, or you can open loudly, but you’re going to open.” Harry saw her eyes dart around to her possessions, and with one last glare, the portrait opened.

Harry strolled into the Gryffindor common room and looked around. Many students were there in the room, but none of the ones he was looking for. Silence slowly stretched out, though it was – for a change – not bothering Harry in the least.

“Dean, I’m looking for Hermione, Neville, and Ginny. Ideas?”

Dean looked surprised to be called upon but shrugged absently. “Neville’s in the greenhouses, the girls are up in the dorms.”

“Right. Thanks.”

Harry ignored the looks and snickers that started up as he headed straight for the archway leading to the girl’s staircase. He wanted to laugh at the recollection from when he first came into Gryffindor Tower. Someone had told him that no males were allowed up the female stairs, and he was going to put that to the test.

“You know you can’t go up these stairs, right?” Floppy sounded almost cautious, which was different from the norm. “Or at least, you shouldn’t be able to.”

Harry walked into the base of the stairwell, passing through the archway. “What, you’re not giving in to that ‘he can do anything’ crap, now are you?” Glancing back, he saw that the entire common room had gone silent again and was watching him avidly.

“I’ve seen your memories, Harry. I’m unwilling to stake a claim here.”

Laughing, Harry put one foot on the stairs. Immediately, a shrill alarm sounded, and the stairs became a slide. Snorting, Harry pulled out his wand and studied the area for the source of the alarm. There was a blatant old Muggle-style alarm that looked like the source of the noise, but it was obviously fake – the alarm lacked the sound of the individual hammers striking the bells. Two or three feet to the left of the Muggle alarm, however, Harry could see one of the bricks in the inner tower glowing brightly. Chuckling at the misdirection, Harry cast a non-verbal silencing spell on the brick, and silence returned to the tower.

“I don’t want to know,” he heard someone say quietly. “Really, I don’t.”

Harry studied the problem a bit more, since now all he had to do was bypass the slide. The obvious answer was to use the slide in the opposite direction, which was simple enough, though it lacked the elegance he desired. Feeling the edges of his hunger, Harry decided that brute force was well enough for now and promised that the next time he would have a better plan in mind.

Sitting with his legs folded at the base of the slide, Harry cast a non-verbal and low-powered Hover Charm on himself with his second wand. Floating a scant inch or so from the floor, he aimed his first wand at the wall by the first platform and cast a silent Accio! While keeping a firm grip on his wand, Harry was able to repeatedly Summon his way straight to the ‘FIFTH-YEAR STUDENTS’ door, where he seized the handle and used it to stay standing, dropping the Hover Charm. Rapping sharply at the door, he called out, “Ginny? Hermione? Got a moment?”

The door opened abruptly, launching Harry into an untidy heap on the floor. “Way to welcome a fellow, Ginny,” he said as he got up. “You could have just said hello.”

Hermione was staring at him from behind the red-haired girl, obviously less than amused. "How did you get up here?"

"Are you a witch or aren't you?"

When Ginny giggled, Hermione finally flushed slightly before looking into the hallway. "You'll tell me how you did that, right?"

"Maybe," Harry said with a vague gesture. "I need the two of you and Neville for a bit of conversation. Sadly, I missed dinner. So we're going to have this conversation in the kitchens, right?"

"What's it about?" Ginny asked quietly. "I've got a good bit of homework I need to get caught up on after all that detention this week. Hermione is trying to help me with it."

"Thirty minutes, can you spare that? It's about this training you all want me to do. I'm going to agree but with conditions."

Harry watched the two girls trade silent looks, which seemed to communicate volumes, before they both turned in unison to put their shoes on. When they were ready, they followed Harry to the edge of the doorway. "See you at the bottom!" Harry sat down and enjoyed the ride. It was like being in a play park again, though he doubted McGonagall or Dumbledore would want to know that. When he finally reached the bottom, he stood up and walked through the archway, at which point the stairs reformed.

Everyone was watching him, which was the same as before, except this time he was getting a much wider range of reactions. Many of the girls looked very uncomfortable, while several of the guys appeared ready to tackle the stairs themselves. Harry chuckled at the idea and leaned back into the area long enough to cancel his silencing charm. There was no point in making it easy for anyone.

"So did you get all the way up there?" Dean finally asked.

"Yeah. Not much of a security system, really."

“Only you, Harry,” Hermione’s voice cut in from behind him, “would say something like that. It’s never been defeated before, according to Hogwarts, A History.”

“Oh, right. That’s the book that says you can’t Apparate around here, right?” Harry grabbed Ginny’s elbow in one hand and Hermione’s in the other, steering them out of the common room post-haste. “I don’t think your book is necessarily correct, Hermione.”

Hermione muttered something unintelligible, which made him smile faintly. When he turned to Ginny, though, she was frowning at him. Obviously she was irritated with something, but he was unsure what it was.

“What about Ron? Should we get him, too?” Hermione asked.

“No. That’s part of what we’ll talk about.” Harry stopped when they came to the stairs. “Err, Hermione, would you get Neville from the greenhouses so I can have a quick word with Ginny? We’ll be in the kitchens.”

Without giving either girl a chance to answer, Harry dragged Ginny off down a side corridor, heading for a secret passageway that went straight from the seventh floor to the corridor just before the passageway to the kitchens.

“Where are we going? The stairs are –“

Harry held one finger up in a silencing motion, tapped an over-sized tapestry of a sleeping dragon between the eyes, and pulled Ginny behind it. As soon as the tapestry settled, Ginny let out a squeak when the floor shifted abruptly. Harry felt her hands grab his arm like a vise, and then it was over. The floor was still, and he pushed through to the other side, dragging Ginny along with him. She looked around for a moment before her mouth formed a silent ‘Oh!’

Walking into the kitchens, Harry called back over his shoulder, “Coming?”



As the elves bustled about gathering food for Harry and a tea service for the others that were coming, Harry sat down at the small table in the corner. "What's got you upset, Ginny?"

Ginny sighed and sank into the seat next to him. "You need to stop pushing on Hermione so hard, Harry. I understand your concerns, and I can see some of the twisted logic, but cutting her down isn't going to help. She doesn't handle change well, and you've been nothing but changes."

Harry thought about that for a few moments and then shrugged. "All right. I'll lay off her for now."

Ginny coughed her tea down. "What? You're giving up just like that? I thought I'd have to hex you to get you to back off."

Harry shrugged again. "It's a fair point. And you gave me the truth, not some story. I trust you as much as I can, and if you say it's like that, that's good enough – for now." Ginny said nothing, but then he really had cut the wind out of her sails if she had been looking for an argument. "Look, we only have a couple of minutes. I don't want to keep you from your homework. The letter you gave me today was from Riddle." When she failed to react immediately, he sighed. "Sorry, I keep forgetting you're catching up. Riddle is Voldemort."

Ginny's hands started shaking almost immediately, and Harry took the cup from her before she dropped it. "Yeah, that was what I was thinking. You asked for training, but you didn't ask for that. Unfortunately, you're stuck now, because he obviously knows we've been spending time together recently. Unless you want to avoid me like the plague and hope he doesn't try anything for a few months, I'd say you're probably in the top twenty or thirty on his 'I want this person' list."

Ginny was extremely pale and put her head into her hands. Harry felt bad for her, but she needed to know.

"It's not a death sentence, Ginny, though I admit it's not good. But think about this for a moment. He knows about everything going on

here to some degree. If I suddenly spend a lot of time with all of your friends and family, training the lot of you, what's he going to want to do then?"

Her brown eyes peeked out between her fingers, and he had to agree with the fear he saw there.

"Yeah, that's what I thought you'd feel. You're in deep shit, and don't think otherwise. But if you still want to push forward, it's going to work differently. I'm really going to go all out with training you. I won't do that with the others. You and I will meet privately, and I'll show you things I'm not showing anyone else – and I mean anyone. Your fealty oath and all that, right?"

She nodded slowly, but he could see that the fear was still there. It was almost palpable in the air around her.

"Right. Then you will decide what, if anything, to pass along to Hermione and Neville. You'll train them like I train you, but there will be things I'll forbid you from showing them. Then, if the three of you want to train others – your family, other students, whatever – that's entirely up to you lot. I'll probably not be there, and that means no other students here should ever be on his mind, as it were."

Ginny said nothing and buried her head in her arms as she dropped to the table.

"One last thing. Do not make any more problems with Umbridge. I'll work to slow her as I can, but based on what I've seen so far, expect her power here to be absolute – beyond Dumbledore's. And I'll definitely talk to you before you go see her next weekend about what the rules and limits are. In the meantime, if something, anything, happens with her, come talk to me. Even if it's just another detention. There's more going on there than you know, and I need to keep track of what she's doing. Got it?"

The elves deposited a small mountain of food in front of him, and Harry felt sheepish in asking for a large dinner since he had only

eaten lightly all day. He doubted that everyone in his year would be able to finish what was in front of him.

“Look, for what it’s worth, I’m very sorry you’ve been dragged into this. If you want out at any time, I’ll find a way to get you out as safely as possible. Just let me know.”

“Harry?” Ginny’s voice was barely audible.

“Yeah?”

“How do you get out of bed in the morning?”

Harry sighed, trying to find a way to answer her. His conversation with Luna came back to him, and suddenly he thought he might understand a small part of what she had been trying to tell him. “Luna told me something, Ginny, something like, ‘the past is fleeting, and the future is eternal.’ The way I interpret that right now is that if you don’t get up and try, you can’t be what you want to be.”

Ginny said nothing more, so Harry ate as he waited for Hermione and Neville to join them. When they finally did arrive, he found it odd that both seemed to be avoiding each other’s gaze, and both were blushing sporadically, if faintly. Harry ignored it as irrelevant for the moment and quickly sketched out how things were going to work. He omitted the reason for the indirection of Ginny teaching them, but he agreed to do magical theory correspondence with Hermione, again through Ginny. No one was to hand him anything, and no one was to spend a lot of time being friendly with him, except for Ginny. He would try to distribute the time he spent with others and make an effort to branch out at least amongst the Gryffindors. If nothing else, his method of defeating the security on the girls’ stairs should make him temporarily welcome among the other boys. By the time their brief discussion was over, Ginny was still pale, and she held onto Harry’s arm all the way back to the Gryffindor common room.

Harry stood outside the Fat Lady’s portrait as the others filed in, but the last image he had was of Ginny looking back at him before she disappeared into the tower. She looked lost and afraid, and he knew

exactly how that felt. Somehow, he was going to have to find a way to be available to her when she needed to escape. He knew how the knowledge that Voldemort wanted you could eat at your mind, eat at your soul, and leave you a walking zombie. He was less than certain it had been a wise thing to do, telling her the truth, but he knew it was the right thing.

As he entered his suite of rooms, he noticed again that Cyril was missing. His Mentor's door stood open, the bed made, everything neat and tidy as it had been since the man disappeared. There was a lack of any note here, either, much as there had been at home. His only hope lay in his Transporter Box, which was a very secure means of communication. Were there no letter in the Box, he was increasingly tempted to call out the hounds to find someone. Things were too volatile for one of his mentors to just disappear without warning, let alone all of them. As he entered his room to retrieve the Box, the voice that spoke was, for a change, unsurprising.

"It was the right thing to do, no matter how hard," Floppy said in Remus' voice. "You'll need to tell the headmaster that she knows."

"Yeah, I figured that one out. At the minimum, he'll have to talk to her teachers, well, the ones that will care at any rate." Harry began the tedious work of going through the wards on his trunk and then on the Transporter Box compartment. Pulling it out, Harry flipped it open, and was relieved that there was something inside. Perhaps it was foolish of him, but he was beginning to feel abandoned and fearful that something had gone hideously wrong. The letter from Remus cancelled those deep fears out completely.

15 Sep 2007

Harry,

Sorry for being out of touch. We're all running around like mad at the moment, though someone will check the Box at home at least once every other day. David has been summoned to the corporate home office and will be out of town until Thursday evening. The rest of us are trying to understand what's happening, because something big is

going on – we just don't know what, and we don't know how we missed it.

We need to convene a Family Meeting with our partners and allies. It's slated for this next Saturday, 23rd Sep, starting at five o'clock. Cyril and I both want to state that this is a serious occasion, and you should dress and act appropriately. Also, we both are making a blanket offer. If there are people there that you think should be here, bring them. This is an open invitation for you to use at your sole discretion. Dumbledore, Ginny, anyone – the choice is yours, though you may need to brief them on proper protocol, particularly any females that you bring. You know how it works, so there's no problem there.

I must now warn you on several fronts. First, Umbridge's rise to power was unstoppable, and Edgar felt it better to let it go through unchallenged than to burn political power now. We can make some 'adjustments' later in the game, but for now – head down! Fudge is also particularly hot for your demise, though there are other things going on with him that are confusing as well. Our bipolar Minister may be developing a third pole.

The Auror corps, particularly the ones Moody has been 'bringing up to snuff,' has also become extremely paranoid lately. The incident at Hogwarts did not aid things, and I must urge you in the strongest manner possible to avoid tangling with any Aurors under anything but life-threatening conditions. You will see, if you have not by now, a notice that the English Ministry is challenging the ICW protocol for you in particular. It's being worded more generically, but it is meant to strip you of all of your protections and return you to ordinary minor citizen status. Keeping your head down will help make defence against this easier, but moreover, we have no idea if it does push through when it might happen. Any Auror entanglement may come on the wrong side of the timeline.

Finally, Dumbledore has been sending out notices to what he calls the 'old crowd,' which we have told you is the Order of the Phoenix. The details are unimportant, except that the first gathering is next Saturday, the day of our meeting, at two o'clock in the afternoon. It will be held in the Hog's Head Inn, a rather disreputable place run by

Dumbledore's brother. You should not arrange to be there, so please don't. We'll share the complete memory log of what happened with you after the FM.

I know you are impatient about the Riddle matter, but all I can say is, patience for one week. We'll all see where things are then. In the meantime, head down, work on your theory and training, and see if you can't reverse the trend and try to make a few more friends, right?

– Remus

Harry was at once irritated and angry over the contents of the letter. "Mentors to a mushroom, it would seem," he muttered as he pulled out a blank piece of paper and began writing quickly on it.

Harry paused after a moment, took the sensory monitor out of the pouch around his neck, and nestled it into the Transporter Box. He then went back to his writing, barely aware that he was cursing under his breath. Finished and still irritated, Harry threw the letter into the Box and activated it with a tap of his wand, not even bothering with any words.

His mentors had at once warned him away from everything vital, told him to go back to making nice-nice, and then instructed him to be a good boy and do more school work. While he could understand the cautions and implications, it was the final paragraph that really pushed him over the edge. Blowing off the Riddle matter, compounded with today's events, which he had sent back, was not something he was going to be able to ignore for a week. By the time Saturday rolled around, he would be acting like Ginny was. Of course, his becoming a wreck would only push her into a complete collapse, which would be loads of fun to explain to her brothers.

Grumbling, Harry went back into the bathroom to brush his teeth. There was no way he was going to get any successful reading or thinking done in the state he was in, so he may as well lay in bed and stare at the ceiling. Of course, his toothbrush was destroyed, but a conjured one would work well enough for the moment.

After spitting the toothpaste into the sink, Harry picked up the towel, only to hear, "I love Harry Potter!"

"Reducto!"

A/N:

Note, I'm far from intimately familiar with Egyptian hieroglyphs. If I've mangled this, I apologize – but I would appreciate any corrections. Special thanks to EnFuego, who lended an extra mind to the ideas noted in the introductory material and cautiously approved them – with the caveat he's no expert either. That said, he's more familiar with them than I am. If you know more, drop me a PM and we can discuss the issues.

Special thanks to Lathac, one of our Brit-pickers on this story, for the legwork in digging up the various parole procedures for England and Ireland.

Thanks, as always, to the betas: cwarbeck, Chreechree, Reg, Sovran, and Sherylyn all kicked the tires a good bit.

## Chapter 28 : Gilded Cages

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18 Jul 1021

The man was tall and strong, red glints playing in his blond hair as he strode back and forth in the very room she now sat in, windowless and deep beneath her ancestral home.

“I’m telling you, Rowena, that it’s been a true gift for me to see how the king thinks, the juggling he is capable of in the demands placed upon his shoulders. Have you seen or heard of his schools? He mandates all freeborn be educated! It is the birthing of a new era, you can almost feel it. Alfred’s choices are changing everything.”

Her own voice was rich and vibrant, a reminder now of scant years that felt as though they were ages past. “And what of it? We are not as they are, no matter how much they may be reaching for understanding.”

Godric turned and faced her, one hand waving her challenge off as though it were no more than an insect. “You know how it has been for our kind these many long years – with careful, circumscribed Master-Apprentice teaching . . . and that pieces of knowledge are still lost, only to be rediscovered later. We do not work with each other enough – not even to discern what we know in common, thus what we have that is unique. And why? You and I both know that we are the scapegoats for the ignorant. Even today, magicians are not well-received in any land. King Alfred has been about the goal of educating his people for some few years now, but at least there you can see how it changes things. What if we were to do the same?”

She could almost recall her responses in her head concurrently to the reflected memory of her challenge as it echoed from the basin. “Godric, you always did act first and consider second. You speculate building a centre for learning, but how will you hide it to avoid that persecution you admit to? Where will you find any students for it? The knowledge passed down from our masters is highly prized and much-secreted, for good reasons you well know. How would you set about



ensuring the safety of those that might be willing to gather for teaching, when you need to keep them safe from each other as much as any students?”

Godric nodded his head in agreement as he resumed pacing in her chamber. “Of course those are the things you would worry over. I admit, they worry me, too. But I have a friend, you see, and she is brilliant with making magic do things I thought not possible. I was hoping to enlist her aid to resolve these rather trivial details.”

“Trivial?” Even to this day, his response struck her as odd. “I know your periodic affliction of sanity scares others, Godric, but you should not call these trivial. If you fly but a few hours north of here, the Franks will happily burn you at the stake should two people agree that you used magic in some manner.”

Godric stopped pacing and frowned at her for a moment. “Yes, I call these trivial compared to finding a way to organise our magical knowledge. To finding a way to systematically teach that knowledge in a timely manner and to make it as easy to learn as reading or writing. To devising a way to store our knowledge, so that those who come after us can be more than we ever could. In the face of those problems, I consider these others trivial. Have you forgotten your years of Apprenticeship and how you were instructed?” With a sharp hand gesture, a gleaming copper table frame appeared. When he snapped his fingers, a thick wooden top adorned it. “Or will you tell me that you can now do this?”

“Point.”

“So I am asking you, Rowena, won’t you come back with me to England? I have been granted by the king a large parcel in Brighthelmston and plan to build a school there. I hope others will join me, but I would rather they join us, or even build schools of their own!” The scene dissolved silently back into the basin, the ghostly fragments of memory reconstituted in quicksilver flashes.

She paused as she reflected on what memory would best suit the needs of the moment to come. Free will guaranteed that the future

was always in flux, so there was no certainty the truth would ever become known. Her job, as she saw it, was to ensure that should any piece of the truth be revealed, it must be the whole truth in one go. The primary flaw was the limited capacity of her construct, or rather, the limited long-term stability such memories would have. A few memories would last all but forever. Too many memories, and all would be for naught.

With a sigh, she put the tip of the wand to her greying temple, lamenting only briefly that their lives were all being cut far short of what they should have been.

Magic was a blessing and a curse.

oOo oOo

Saturday, 15 Sep 1989

“I feel it is in their best interests that you agree, Remus.” Nicolas’ voice was urgent, yet muted as events dictated.

Remus was tired and depressed in ways that he had not felt for years, and the unhappy circumstance of the Flamels arriving on the eve of Margaret’s death was another strain he simply had no way to deal with. A close relationship borne from their correspondence and free-thinking was too weak to take such weighty matters on their first face-to-face meeting.

Between his own grief and listless anger, he was doing everything he could to help David and Harry hold onto their sanity. It was a tragic event, yes, and upon learning exactly how it had transpired, he would even say it was horrifying. He feared at a very deep level what would happen should David see Harry as the cause of his wife’s death. It would be the natural human reaction, given the sequence of events. Remus knew that with time, the initial anger – hatred even – coupled to survivor’s resentment would be replaced by a true understanding of events. Remus felt, however, that such a transitional state in David, no matter how brief, might cause Harry to revert to his prior fractured self after everything that had happened.

Perenelle silently served tea to Remus and Nicolas before sitting between them, holding the cup firmly in her hands. "Please, Remus, we are not asking you to lie. We are merely asking that you do not tell them this."

Remus sipped his tea and tried to find the infinite patience that his students claimed he possessed. "A calculated omission is still a lie none the less."

Perenelle's soft sigh almost escaped his notice, but her strong gaze held him when he looked at her. "Tell me, Remus, did you know what we just told you? No, I thought not. Your condition would preclude you being told. The English Ministry is quite good at discriminating its services, reserving them from the Muggle-raised, among others. Knowing how close you felt to Margaret, and knowing how thoughtful you are, let me ask you this: what would this knowledge do to young Harry? Or David?"

Remus shook his head slowly. "It would destroy them. That one simple act could have saved her life even with that wound . . . they would come to hate the world of magic, or at the very least, they will regard you all with contempt. Harry has a very keen sense of right and wrong. He, in particular, would not take this well." He watched in his own brew of bitterness as the married couple exchanged a lengthy silent communication with a brief glance, before Perenelle turned back to him.

"And you? How do you feel, knowing this?"

Now Remus was deeply torn. On the one hand, he valued the newfound knowledge. It could save others if the situation arose. On the other, he understood why the Ministry did not hand out such knowledge to everyone. It would be far too easy to abuse, but that did not cool his internal flames of hate. He had decades of prejudice and bias to blunt his immediate reactions to such discriminations, but neither Harry nor David had any basis to fully understand the subtleties of what he had just learned. "I don't want to lose Harry, not again."

“Truly, that is why we ask this of you, Remus.”

Remus sighed in turn and rested his forehead on the cool surface of the table. Eventually, even he had to admit to their logic and to the demands of the moment. “I’ll not tell them, but with conditions. If I’m asked, I’ll speak the truth. And if I feel that either is able to cope with this, and they have not asked, then I will tell them. Of course, if it becomes a matter of life and death, I’ll simply use the knowledge and live with the consequences.”

Nicolas’ voice was soft yet held an ineffable strength deep inside it. “That’s all we can ask for, Remus.”

“There’s something else,” Remus said after a moment. “Harry has a strange sort of luck. He’s either luckier than anyone has a right to be or is cursed horribly. Things like this tend to come out, and with him, it’s almost always at a bad time. Perhaps the worst possible time.”

Perenelle laid one hand on his arm, squeezing briefly until he looked up at her gaze. “Then let us simply hope for the best.”

Remus looked at the clock on the wall briefly. “I need to go. The night is coming soon, and my furry little problem is going to flare up. I’ll be back in the morning, but I won’t be worth much.”

“I could never agree with you on that, Remus,” Perenelle said softly. “But we will try to do what little we may here.”

Remus shrugged slightly. “You’ll need to do more than that. You’ll need to be the best.”

oOo oOo

Tue, 24 Dec 1991

“Where is this place?”

“Remus, you have lived here far longer than we have. We should be asking you that question.”

Remus sighed briefly before turning to the last two that arrived. "Harry? How are you feeling, now?"

"M'okay, Remus. My head doesn't hurt anymore." Harry's voice was subdued, unnaturally calm. Of course, the overly generous dose of Calming Draught that Perenelle had forced upon him was in no small manner contributing to that condition. A simple headache restorative had been useless for the debilitating pain Harry had experienced, which was unusual in and of itself. They would have to investigate why his head had ached so severely without warning. For now, it was slightly amusing to see Harry relaxed to the point of unconcern about anything at all.

Standing in a thicket on the side of a country lane, Remus saw that rolling lowland hills and farms mostly surrounded them. A small dirt road led off from the rather narrow paved track, but otherwise there was little present to indicate the existence of humans – were the neatly set acres of each farm to be considered 'natural' scenery. "Right. Let's see, then, eh?"

Remus extracted his wand and waved it about briefly before letting it rest in his flat palm. The tip swung back and forth several times before settling in a direction that led down the dirt road. It was the simplest of tracking spells, too subtle for anyone to notice without a thorough examination and too weak to give an exact location. A series of staged jumps around the country had narrowed the location down by triangulation, and he knew they should be near the fellow of interest. On closer inspection, it was clear the dirt road was once a two-groove path left behind by automobiles, but vegetation had increasingly overrun from its centre. "We need to go that way, apparently. The distance is quite short, so it's probably that cottage 'round the bend."

It was hard to see clearly with the setting winter sun in their eyes, but in the weakened afternoon light, he could make out what was a rather small dwelling. While trees were scattered about the edges of fields or periodically along the main road, there was no form of cover or visual obfuscation between the small home and the thicket where they stood.

“Disillusionment Charms, I should think,” Nicolas said quietly before tapping Harry smartly on the head, showing an increasingly unified thinking from the strange afternoon. Paranoia in healthy doses made perfect sense – at times. The only disagreement was from Harry, but he was under the influence as it were, leaving his opinion somewhat dubious of correctness. Even before the camouflage magic on Harry began to settle, Remus saw the cool ripples start from where Nicolas tapped himself in turn. As quickly as he could manage, Nicolas had everyone other than Remus well hidden. “Let’s go find out more about our man of mystery.”

It was a cold walk, but silence was kept after the initial planning. Remus would handle the approach, and Nicolas would support him as backup. The winter air was crisp and nearly biting, but thankfully the wind was mostly still. The small cottage grew larger with every step yet remained small and snug. Had it been in proper upkeep, Remus felt it would be a rustic yet pleasant setting in which to live or raise a small family. While the cottage still appeared to be quite sound, the signs of neglect in the garden and upon the shutters were indicative of a resident indifferent to the insistent demands of nature.

“I wish Edgar were here,” Harry offered in the quiet as they reached the partially obscured front gate. The gate itself was open half-way, yet the leading edge was buried in the ground and had clearly been that way for some time. “He could fly up to the windows and just tell us what was going on.”

Remus smiled slightly, acknowledging the simplistic point to himself, though he turned and gestured in the area that Harry’s voice had come from for silence. Standing before the dwelling, Remus considered the setting. He saw nothing untoward in the least, but Harry’s reaction – likely to the person they thought was inside – was more than enough to unsettle him.. With a deep breath for that extra dash of serenity, he made his way to the front door and rapped sharply three times.

The soft glow of light from the front windows flickered briefly, but he could discern no sounds inside. After waiting sufficiently long that he

thought perhaps two minutes had passed, he rapped again, three quick blows with the back of his fist. The faint seam of light under the door depicted a shadow moving before he heard a loud scraping noise. It was not the sound of a bolt being thrown back but was something else, something he could not recognise.

“W-w-who’s th-th-there?” a rather timid voice weakly called out.

Remus had to strain to hear it properly. “Happy Christmas Eve!” he called loudly. “I’m Jimmy Evans, a new neighbour down the way.”

Remus heard a faint thumping noise, as though something heavy had been dropped, when the voice inside answered. “J-j-just a m-moment . . .” and then the door swung open, revealing the man with the strange headpiece. At this range, Remus easily recognised that it was a turban and not a hat after all. “Y-yes?”

There was almost a faint whinge in the man’s tone, as though he had no desire to be interrupted on this night. Remus wondered briefly whether a personal event in the man’s past had predisposed him to solitude or sorrow during an otherwise festive time, but the turban was an unknown factor. Perhaps he merely disliked the religious connotations of the hols, thereby being short to any and all comers who might be expressing yuletide greetings.

“Sorry to bother you,” he offered with as pleasant a smile as he could, “but I thought the holiday might be a good excuse to meet my neighbours. I’m Jimmy.” Remus stuck his hand out and held it there in space as the young man before him trembled very slightly and stared at the hand as though it were offensive in some manner. Belatedly, Remus realised that some religious cultures found physical contact with unbelievers highly offensive, and slowly he let his hand drop. He knew that might complicate the game plan for keeping Nicolas nearby at all times.

The man’s eyes rose back to meet his gaze, before he stepped back slightly. “C-c-come in.” He stepped back and bowed slightly, gesturing with his back hand for Remus to enter into the foyer.

Remus made a production out of smiling at the invitation and boldly walking forward, and then he deliberately tripped on the threshold, sprawling into the side of the young man, causing both of them to tumble to the ground. "Oh!" Remus cried out. "I'm so sorry!" Remus tried to scramble to his feet but did his best to keep the man down longer than strictly necessary by alternately grabbing and releasing his arm as though he were trying to pull the fellow to his feet. Nicolas was to follow them in during the confusion, while Perenelle and Harry would wait just outside the door. Perenelle was to charm the door such that if required, it would fly open at her touch – a security precaution should they need to leave in a hurry.

When the young man was finally standing again, as Remus continued to apologise, there was the faintest flicker in the atmosphere of the cottage that sent a tremulous shiver down his spine. For the briefest moment, Remus thought that there had been a hint of recognition on some level in the eyes of his host. Then it was gone, and he was being waved off with a repeated 'N-no m-matter, n-no m-matter' as the door was sealed. With almost a lazy flick of the man's wrist, the deadbolt was thrown and Remus' host was facing him, eyes on the floor. "M-m-may I g-get y-you anyth-th-thing?"

With a gesture, he indicated that Remus should precede him into the house proper. Remus turned to see a small formal living room just down the hall, strewn with stacks of books and papers. Some of the materials even looked faintly familiar, such that –

The hand on his throat was more powerful than any grip he had ever felt before. He could feel his blood vessels surging in pressure at the same instant he involuntarily coughed in reflex, but nothing was able to escape from the crushing grip.

"Liar! Werewolf!" The voice was a hiss of hate spitting in his ear, a hot fetid breath washing over his face. Tears of pain and adrenaline filled his eyes. He was jerked back, the turban-headed man directly behind him, their backs to the wall.

Remus was driven to his knees with almost casual ease. His own hands were digging vigorously at the fingers clamped on his throat.



His fingers scrabbled for purchase, and he ignored the self-inflicted gouges from his nails as he tried to fight off his attacker.

A bolt of violent red passed just in front of his eyes before it was deflected. It scorched a round burn onto the putrid purple wallpaper.

He was on his knees. The hand had been removed from his throat. He was gasping for breath. He realised his throat was partially crushed. It was all he could do wheeze any air in or out as he fell onto his side, trying to massage his throat into working again. The adrenaline was making him shake; it was giving everything a surreal appearance. Time was fleet as an eagle yet slow as molasses. He saw the turban-clad man flick a wand motion. A strangely dancing pattern of light resolved itself into Nicolas, who was already throwing a bolt of purple at the turbaned man.

Remus could hear his own wheezing so very loud in his ears. As the bolt leapt across the narrow distance, the front door all but exploded inward.

The man with the turban had a giant silver shield in his off hand. To Remus' fading mind, it seemed almost magical as it appeared in the blink of an eye and the room grew somewhat dimmer. The harsh rasping of his throat was broken by his own fingers digging frantically at his neck. Without his conscious direction, they were trying to force the damaged passages open. He was drowning, the edges of panic creeping upon him. A shattering scream reached his ears above the roaring of his own laboured breathing. Remus looked up as Nicolas fell to a crackling black lightening. The old man was writhing on the floor, sparks and wisps of smoke forming at his extremities.

Perenelle had appeared, he realised after a moment. Her wand appeared to be on fire, a beautiful aura flaring and weaving. The man with the turban was somehow missing his shield. Nicolas cried out feebly, trying to rise. The room grew painfully bright, but Remus' eyes were already watering.

Perenelle was on the ground. Both of her legs were neatly severed. She reminded him of a discarded mannequin in a run-down shopping centre. Blood was everywhere. Remus saw Harry standing in the

doorway, calmly watching everything. Harry's wand almost languidly made perfectly precise motions, drawing a terminally slow arc through space. The boy's off hand was pressed firmly to his scar.

The turban writhed like a snake, sliding, twisting, rising, flaring. A hideous face emerged from its folds, hissing at them, hissing at the host. The walls were closing in. Remus was losing the battle to breathe and remain conscious. Even the floor was becoming hard to see.

"No!" Her voice was so very weak, the light so very dim. The man with the winged turban darted for Harry, but Perenelle somehow placed a shield just in time, blocking progress. The house shuddered for a moment. Blood was everywhere, and it was raining as Perenelle's chest exploded with a point-blank curse.

Nicolas began screaming then. In the dimness of the moment, Remus thought he saw the deep illuminating spark of life therein flicker, once, then vanish. "No!" Nicolas' cry was lost in the aftermath. The turbaned man was facing Nicolas again, wand held high.

Harry's precise wand motion was over. Remus thought he had heard Harry calmly say, "Reducto."

A terrible sound was echoing as the host fell to the ground. The head rolled away as the body dropped like so much dead weight. Shrieking, the wraith in the turban detached from the head and fled to the back of the house, an odd turban-cloak billowing behind.

And then Remus knew no more.

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Fri, 15 Sep 1995

"No, I won't say you've broken him, but you've not done him any favours, either. Albus Dumbledore has no idea of how to handle him, and he has decades of experience with unruly and difficult children. Your child oscillates between false bravado, petulant youth, and all

but dead, wearing the mask that gets him what he desires in the moment. He has not the mindset he needs to do what is before him.”

Cyril's implied accusations were ringing in the silence, Remus and Sirius shifting gazes back and forth before they turned to him. David could feel the pressure of his headache mounting, and his temper was already on a short leash given the events that had transpired over the past two months. “What are you trying to say, Cyril? What's your point here?”

“My point? My point is that you've no idea just how damaged he is, nor have you taken steps to rectify the situation.”

David was on his feet, his anger bubbling over before he even realised it. “That is my son you're talking about! I love him, and I will not tolerate you implying otherwise!” The strength of his own shouting surprised him, and he found his hands were clenched in the rush of emotion. “I know him far better than you, who have only been here days!”

Sirius had surged to his feet as well, and David could see he was ready to defend Harry except for Remus' hand restraining him.

Cyril seemed unimpressed, ignoring Sirius and waving off David's mounting fury as though it were inconsequential. “Perhaps you do, though I wonder how you let these things develop if you care as you claim. Why did you allow Nicolas to isolate Harry here? Not only did he decline Hogwarts, you removed him from the local schools as well. You froze his social skills as those of an eleven-year-old, and already emotionally fragile no less, whilst thrusting him into a curriculum any adult would struggle with. You let him become a student trainee of the War Mages, a babe in the wild, and under Nicolas of all people. What were you thinking?”

Remus broke the silent tension that followed, his hand still white with the grip holding Sirius back. “What do you mean, ‘under Nicolas of all people’? He was widely regarded as a prominent figure of justice and highly sought after for his knowledge.”

Cyril sighed and sat back down, grudgingly followed by Sirius, leaving David standing there with the blood rushing in his ears. David was confused over the strange tangents this newcomer was thrusting in front of them, and he had to admit after hearing it that Remus' question was one he wanted an answer to as well. He slowly sank back into his seat, wishing the ibuprofen would work faster to clear his brain.

“Nicolas Flamel was the head of the War Mage committee some three centuries prior. He stepped down in protest after nearly eighty years of leadership. The nature of the protest was secret and between the War Mages and the ICW main body.” Cyril paused to systematically hold the gaze of each person in turn. “Even though he stepped down, he still was instrumental in choosing each of the next several heads of the Mages. What cannot be ignored, however, is that the War Mages have been decreasing in number and power ever since he did step down. Why is that?”

David had known the first part of that information, but the second part was new to him. Sirius snorted briefly, before retorting, “I suppose you should just tell us.”

Cyril shrugged briefly. “I don't know. It's something that's under a secretive oath. But that is merely one issue. All students and apprentices are required to have a detailed journal kept by their mentors and teachers. Every War Mage that encounters a student or apprentice is required to record their interactions and impressions. When I became Harry's new mentor, I took over his logbook. I should like to know why the last entry in it was dated the twenty-third of December, 1991.”

“The twenty-third?” Remus asked after a moment.

“Correct.”

When David looked up, Remus met his gaze. It was an awkward framing, but David nodded his agreement to Remus. Remus flicked his eyes to the scowling Sirius before focusing again on Cyril.

“Perenelle died on the twenty-fourth, by Voldemort’s, uh, hand, I suppose. Perhaps the two are related?”

Cyril shook his head briefly. “Perhaps. That does not change the fact that Harry is perilously close to being lost.”

David bent his head, absently running his two hands back through his hair, clasping fingers as to both stretch and strain his tired muscles. “Given all of the events that kept happening, we felt that the offer from Nicolas was ideal. He would be better equipped to handle . . . what Harry needed, needs, to learn. By the time Nicolas offered the extra protections of the War Mage status, it was clear that it wasn’t really an option to say no.”

Cyril sighed, and the blank mask the man wore was somewhat offensive to David. “And you simply assumed that Nicolas had no agenda of his own? I’ll grant that you might not anticipate that he would single-handedly dismantle the War Mages for some private reason. But did you not wonder that he would not hesitate to use all of us to achieve his vision of the future? Surely it was clear that his notions of time and mortality were no longer human.”

“You appear to know more than we do,” David said, struggling to keep his fluctuating anger in check. Cyril’s implications and hints about their negligence or failure to grasp elusive threads were doing nothing for his efforts so far. “I have personally seen no evidence to agree with your comments about Nicolas.” David paused to blow out a long, slow breath. “As for Harry, we all agree, he needs to regain some sense of balance or perspective. Ever since this summer . . . I have asked him to restart his therapy sessions, and he has agreed to do so.”

David watched as Cyril rose again and began pacing. It was clear that, as unpleasant as the conversation had been thus far, Cyril had more to relay. There had to be a reason for the man asking for this meeting, after all, something beyond conspiracy theories and innuendo. “Yes, some form of counselling would help. Yet, there is much going on with Harry that I fear. I agree with his training, and he should continue that schedule, particularly in the physical arts. They build fine control and hone the mind’s edge. His continued use of all

of you for a crutch in his own thinking, more, as a buffer from his peers, must stop. The lot of you will become scarce for in-person interactions. In this, Dumbledore and I both agree.”

“No.” David found himself on his feet again and let his resentment and anger flare, no longer trying to keep it under a tight lid.

Sirius was up as well, throwing off Remus’ efforts at restraint. “Hell, no!” he shouted. “I’m not doing such a damn thing! The last thing Harry needs is to be abandoned once more!”

David nodded slowly, agreeing entirely with Sirius sentiment. “I will not agree to this. I will see him as much as I am able and he desires, regardless of what you want.”

Cyril snorted at Sirius, dismissing the tall figure with ease, and then closed the distance to David. There was nothing overtly dangerous in his stance or tone, but David felt the urge to step back all the same. He had heard stories of what Cyril was capable of and hated that he felt a faint twinge of fear. Cyril seemed to either not notice or not care about the situation as his eyes found David’s. “Curtail your self indulgence. I am not recommending; I am telling you. You will all become scarce and interact with Harry primarily through letters until I indicate otherwise.”

Remus blocked Sirius’s efforts to lunge toward Cyril. David was trembling in his anger. This stranger came into his home, threatening his relationship with his son, and intimated that David himself was a contributing source of dysfunction all around. He was unable to stop his seething anger from coming out as he all but hissed his response. “This is my son, not yours. I’ll pull him out of the magical world entirely before I bow to your demands!”

“You signed the paperwork making him a ward of the War Mages. You could break the contract as he is still underage, but that makes him a citizen of Britain. You, as a Muggle, cannot be his magical supervisor. Thus, he will be subject to Fudge’s Ministry. What do you think would happen to him then?” Cyril’s voice was void of any compassion at all, and David found his hands were shaking

involuntarily as they clenched and unclenched. "As the assigned mentor, Harry is mine, and mine alone. This is no longer a game of your making. Indeed, this is no longer a game."

Remus cleared his throat in the growing tension, and it was just enough to prevent David from joining Sirius in lunging at this intruder into his home. "Given all of the conspiracy theories, then, what's your agenda, Cyril? Or Dumbledore's?"

Cyril held David's gaze with almost cool contempt. "Our agenda must be that a forest cannot exist without trees."

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Sun, 17 Sep 1995

"Potter."

Harry stopped in the hall, looking back to see the gangly redhead approaching him at a leisurely rate. The agitation of his stomach demanding food already had him irritated, and things did not appear to be improving anytime soon given how little the incoming boy liked Harry. "What a surprise, it's another Weasley."

"Very funny," Ron told him, handing over a folded bit of parchment. "I got a letter from my dad. He asked that I hand this note over to you."

Harry knew the parchment had no enchantments upon it but was unwilling to divulge that knowledge freely. Making a bit of a production out of it, Harry studied the parchment minutely until he thought Ron's patience might be about to end in an explosion of some kind. Smirking faintly at successfully working out some of his own irritation, Harry deftly plucked the parchment from the boy's fingers and broke the seal.

Mr Potter,

Given the recent events that transpired and the unfortunate involvement of my family once more, I have asked my wife to forebear continuing the exchanges betwixt the two of you. I hereby ask the same courtesy of you to her.

She has complied with my request, albeit regretfully. For my own sake, I must admit in all honesty that I suspect this is a temporary situation at best. Regardless, I hope that we all might enjoy at least a week or two of peace.

Cordially,

Arthur Weasley

15 Sep

Harry quirked one eyebrow in passing. That certainly made the situation with the lemming prank as clear as mud, since the note was dated before the incident took place. That would, in theory, rule out the Weasley matriarch and leave him back with a list of possible suspects yet with weak prospects. Now wondering whom to investigate as the primary culprit, Harry shoved the note in his bag. "Lovely. Thanks, Errand-Boy."

"Are you incapable of being nice?"

Harry frowned at the redhead a moment. He was incredibly hungry this morning, almost as if he had drained his magic fully through drills. Sharing the memories of events with Floppy had delayed his getting out of the suite in time for the very start of breakfast, even if the Hat was now lazing about as a scarf tossed over one shoulder. The time spent with the Hat, added to his private early-morning exercises, had honed a previously mild appetite into a state where cannibalism might become a viable option. "Right now? Pretty much. Was there something you wanted?"

Ron shrugged for a moment, the tall boy regarding him silently. Harry could see the lingering irritation on Ron's face but was not overly interested in setting him at ease. This particular Weasley had been against Harry since shortly after his arrival. While the reaction was



understandable at first, the continued clinging to a prior sentiment despite the evidence absolving Harry of most direct guilt in events made no sense.

“Err, yeah, actually,” Ron said. “I . . . well . . . look, did you and Ginny have a falling out or something?”

The question was nonsensical as far as Harry was concerned. “Not to my knowledge, why?”

Ron shrugged briefly. “I’m starving. Are you headed to breakfast?”

“Yeeeeessss,” Harry drew the word out, hoping to get Ron back on topic, despite the urge to salivate heavily over the mere thought of already prepared food.

“Right.” Ron jerked his head toward the corridor and started walking. Harry assumed that meant his company was requested, but due to the general antipathy toward Harry, Ron was likely unwilling to actually vocalise that. “Err, Ginny’s been off since she came back to the tower last night.”

“Oh? Off like a light, or off like odoriferous?”

Ron glanced at him for a moment before putting his gaze back on the floor in front of his rather large feet. “You’re rather cranky, but yeah, ‘oh.’ Reminds me of her first couple of years here, actually.”

“Hmmm.” Harry tried to recall the conversation he had been stuck in when George wanted to convey something profound but had mostly made a muddled mess of too many ideas. “I think one of your brothers mentioned she was pretty lifeless back then.” Of course, Harry knew exactly why she might be thoroughly depressed today, but this was probably not the time for that type of honesty.

Ron shrugged again, giving Harry the impression that the fellow was not particularly keen on admitting emotional things. That fit another mental tic mark on his Hermione-watch-list, but Ginny had asked him to lay off of the topic for a bit. “Yeah,” Ron said, interrupting Harry’s

thoughts. "That's about right. I like the way Ginny's been becoming more . . . her . . . old self . . . lately. Seemed to come out when you came along. I just wondered if you'd had a row or something."

Harry was no longer paying close attention to the path they were on. It was joining the main corridors down to the Great Hall, so it was more interesting to focus on the themes that Ron was hinting at. "If we had, what would you do about it? Offer to pound me?"

Ron winced fairly hard at that suggestion, quickly averting his eyes away from Harry. "I think we both know that'd be an empty threat. So, no. I was thinking I might offer to be a . . . a go-between, yeah? Might help make for reconciliation, clear the air, get you two back together, that sort of thing."

"Er, Weasley, you do realise we're not 'together' like you're insinuating, right?"

This time Ron stopped and looked at Harry directly, forcing Harry to stop as well if the conversation were to continue. "If you say so, Potter. It looks like it to everyone else, though. If you are or if you aren't, well . . . George and Fred talked with me about it. I'm not going to get involved. I just want my sister to be . . . who she is supposed to be, not this . . . this shell. Seemed like you were making her that way."

Ron's tacit admission that he was both less than pleased with the idea of a 'together' state and that the boy would prefer his sister's happiness over his own mindset was unexpected. Harry had no tangible inclinations toward the notion, but it was a giant red button that said 'do not push' in flashing letters. He really could not pass up the opportunity to explore more of the psyche of Hermione's partner and the boy that was so wary of him. "Really? So you're saying you'd be fine with me snogging your sister? I thought you didn't like me."

Ron closed his eyes and let out a slow breath. "Not really. I'd prefer it be almost anyone else instead of you. But as I've been repeatedly told, it's her decision, not mine."

“And what of Herms? Is she putting you up to this, too?”

“Don’t call her that!” Ron said with surprising heat. “She hates nicknames!”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, oh,” Ron grumbled. “Why are you so hard on her anyway?”

Harry shrugged in a deliberate mimicry of Ron’s typical responses. Given the lack of reaction to the shrug, however, he decided the subtlety was lost. “It passes the hours. Are you not happy to have more personal time with your girlfriend?”

Ron flushed as soon as Harry said girlfriend, which made no sense. It was well known now, if not before, so the source of consternation had to lie in some facet of their actual relationship. Something about one or both of them left them uneasy with the status quo labelling. “I guess I shouldn’t complain, it is nice, but, well . . . it’s not like it’s her choice, now is it? Doesn’t quite mean the same.”

Harry whistled softly. “Wow, Ron. You’re full of surprises today. I had you pegged for avoiding emotional issues.”

Ron scuffed his foot for a moment and looked like he was going to retort, but loud voices coming down the corridor behind them clearly ended the moment.

“Right, then,” Harry offered. “I’m off to breakfast, Weasley. Thanks for the heads-up on your sister, by the by. I’ll see if I can’t help out somewhat.”

Ron nodded in turn, though the redhead kept his gaze on his trainers and made no motion to resume the trek for breakfast. Instead, Harry wandered into the Great Hall alone and scanned the Gryffindor table. He saw the clump of usual suspects he had been sitting with but instead angled for a pair of empty seats half-way down the table from them. Ignoring the looks of surprise in both locations, he sank into the

space next to Dean and promptly filled his plate with bangers and eggs as everyone around him watched.

“Er, good morning?” Dean offered tentatively. The knot of people around Dean were obviously surprised at Harry’s proximity since he had been sitting primarily with the Weasley-mix before this morning.

“Yeah, g’morning to all,” Harry muttered as he poured himself juice, and Ron continued past him to join the others. “Don’t let me interrupt your conversation.”

As Harry began eating, the silence stretched out. Rather than worry over what Dean, Seamus, Lavender, or Parvati were thinking, he focused on appeasing his raging hunger while he scanned the Head Table. Cyril and Dumbledore were both missing, but Slughorn was there. Harry winced inside as he made eye contact. Surely he would be receiving yet another invitation to spend ‘quality time’ with the new potions instructor in a one-on-one setting. The mere idea was enough to make his teeth ache.

“So, Harry, how did you get past the defences on the girls’ tower?” Dean asked, finally breaking the silence.

Before he could answer, Ginny sat down next to Harry. The others in the knot of Weasleys-and-more had their eyes on her as she sat down, which could have been expected since she deliberately moved from sitting with them to her new location.

She kept her gaze on the table, but he could easily tell she was sinking into depression. As she slumped forward, she leaned slightly into his side, as though seeking a leeward shelter in a growing tempest. She said nothing, so he decided to merely let her be for the moment. Looking back at Dean, he caught the mixture of curiosity and disapproving looks from the other girls nearby.

Smiling slightly, Harry gave a vague wave with his unimpeded left hand. “Trade secret. But you could try using magic. Maybe you’ve heard of it?”

Harry was rewarded with small smiles from Lavender and Parvati, and most other girls in the area simply nodded faintly or looked away as he scanned the attuned faces. Dean merely sighed dramatically before replying in a wistful tone, "And here I thought I might learn something new and useful."

"Good luck there, eh?" Harry offered while Seamus chuckled, and the conversation picked back up on something Quidditch related. Harry tuned it out and looked down at the crown of Ginny's head, since her gaze was still on the table. She was pushing her utensils around a bit aimlessly as far as he could tell, so he decided it was time to interrupt her quietly. "Are you sure you want to be sitting next to me, Ginny? Seems like it hasn't been a good place to be."

Ginny did not react much to the question, until he heard her whispered response. "What difference does it make now?"

Understanding all too well the vicious downward spiral her own mind was working on, he reached out with his unencumbered arm to pour her a glass of juice as well. He looked back down the table to see where she had been sitting and noted the glossy sheen of a plate that remained untouched. Before he could look away, he saw Ron watching the two of them intently, giving a rather slow and deliberate nod to Harry. Harry quirked an eyebrow in response, ignoring the rather unsubtle hints, then he pushed some bangers and toast onto her plate.

"I'm guessing you didn't sleep much," he offered in the same whisper she had used.

Her head shook slightly against his shoulder.

"Ginny . . . It's a pretty raw deal to find out life has it in for you. I remember when . . . things . . . like this would come up, it always took me a while to stop constantly thinking about whatever was going on. But you need to eat. Even though you don't want to, try, please."

Harry made no effort to force the topic or ask again, instead doing his best to eat without dislodging her too much. After several minutes of

silence, she sat up a little bit and started to eat mechanically. Harry could tell her interest in the idea was quite dead, but she was doing it because she knew she still needed to.

The morning owls streamed into the Great Hall, the general volume of everyone increasing in response to letters or news. Harry helped himself to extra portions of the eggs and toast, with plenty of jam, before a commotion by the twins caught his attention. Harry saw a rather stiff and regal-looking owl take off from the table in front of them, while they were having an animated but hushed conversation with several sharp gestures over a piece of parchment. Neville was slowly leaning away from them as their movements became ever greater.

Harry decided it was none of his business and finished the rest of his breakfast. It was much easier to eat when Ginny was not impairing his movements, but he felt it was a sacrifice he was obligated to make. He had unintentionally put her in such a precarious position. If he could help her recover and, more importantly, remain safe, then he would do whatever he could.

Though she managed to eat everything he had put on her plate, Ginny's meal was over long before he finished his breakfast. When he pushed his plate away slightly and left the silverware in the middle of it, she leaned against his side again and closed her eyes.

“C'mon, Ginny. ¡Ándale! ¡Ándale! ¡Arriba! ¡Arriba!” Rising, Harry tugged Ginny to her feet and motioned for her to walk with him out of the hall. She fell in step beside him, though it was apparent how tired she was. When they reached the momentarily empty Entrance Hall, Harry gently caught her elbow to get her attention. “I want to give you a choice. You can train with me this morning, now, or we can do that this afternoon. It doesn't have to be physical training if you're too tired, but we need to cover some ground in something. Time's far too valuable to lose. Which would you prefer?”

Ginny's gaze felt somewhat distant to Harry as he stood there waiting for her response. He had seen a similar look, of being mentally frazzled and exhausted, when Remus had pulled too many all-nighters working on some new idea that kept eluding his grasp. When

she finally looked back at him, she just gave him a weak partial smile and shrugged.

“Right, Weasleys and their shrugs. It’s like a whole new language.” Her smile seemed a bit more genuine, but it was still mostly empty of her spirit. Tugging on her elbow, he began leading her toward the stairs and the Come-And-Go Room as a destination.

“Oi! Harry, old chap!” Harry paused and turned as he was half-way up the first staircase.

George was waving toward him to garner his attention. “Problem, George?”

George just shook his head for a moment as he closed the distance. “I’d love to know how you can tell us apart so easily, Harry.”

Harry just smiled, knowing it had to be irritating to the fellow. “It’s magic. For a school that teaches magic, it’s amazing how many people just don’t seem to know how to use it.”

“Very funny. It’s not right for a bloke without spectacles to make such a spectacle of things. Right, Ginny?” Ginny seemed to have no interest in the conversation, just waving off George’s query before he turned back to Harry. “Right, I need to borrow you for lunch, Harry. Got a meeting of sorts that we were asked to bring you along for.”

“A meeting? That sounds . . . curious. In the castle, I presume? And not for Slughorn?” Harry was mildly intrigued that they might have some kind of event going on, even more so that the parties wanted him around for it.

“Most of us don’t get to leave the building just because we feel like it, old boy. So yeah, it’s here, and no, we don’t run errands for the professors.” George glanced again at Ginny, before he nodded slightly in her general direction.

Harry understood the implicit question but had no answers. Rolling his shoulders for response to the inquiry, he asked aloud, “So where

shall we meet? Dungeons? Towers? Forbidden places? Broom cupboards?" George winced hard at the last suggestion, causing Harry to crow, "Ha! How is Katie, by the way?"

George shook one finger in an exaggerated manner at Harry in response, indignation on his face. "I'm going to find out how you're doing this, young man, and then we'll see who knows what."

Harry grinned in victory while Ginny asked quietly, "Katie? What happened to Alicia?"

"Oooo, sounds like it's a right drama around here," Harry chuckled. "Is this the only form of entertainment? A bit of pranking and keeping tabs on who is seeing who? How . . . incestuously close."

"Ugh," George moaned, "please don't go there. Alicia's fine, she just . . . wanted a break, Ginny. I'm okay with it, I guess. It's not like we're no longer friendly, you know? As for you, Mr Potter, let's just meet here, eh?"

Without waiting for a response, George turned and marched away, back straight and singing a tune that sounded suspiciously like one Harry had previously heard from Peeves. Shrugging at the conundrum of solving who mimicked whom in that line of thinking, Harry started climbing the stairs again, Ginny at his side.

"That's what had Neville and Hermione so flushed last night," Ginny said quietly. "Hermione found him with Cho. He's been trying to be decent, but she's rebounding hard. I just don't want him to get hurt."

"This really is a rather closed system, isn't it? Everyone knows everyone else, and there's only an illusion of privacy. Kind of disturbing, really."

Ginny sighed a bit more as she kept pace with him. "It's not that bad, really. It just means you need to be careful to be nice most of the time. If you irritate everyone around you, well, where else will you go? You'd be pretty friendless the rest of your life until you started doing



the right thing. That's probably part of why you're so . . . shocking. You just don't care."

"Why not live among the Muggles? It's not like they're contagious or something."

Ginny said nothing in response until they were almost to the seventh floor corridor that was their destination. "Could you really give up using magic all the time like that? Or not having a job that uses it? I don't know if I could."

"Given the choice of living in a fishbowl or having privacy, hell yes," Harry answered sharply. "I don't know how you lot can stand it." Harry paused for a moment, holding one hand up to indicate she should remain silent. Studying the surrounding area, Harry determined that nothing living was going to overhear them. "I'll let you in on the secret to this place. You might want a place to go to feel safe, right? So you come up here, concentrate on what kind of a room you want, and then walk back and forth three times in front of that portrait."

Ginny's eyebrows climbed toward her hairline. "Really? That's it?"

"Yeah."

"Who else knows about this?"

Harry shrugged uneasily. "As far as I can tell, we're now the only two that are in the castle." It was true. All the others were either not allowed into the castle or dead. Of course, having permission to be in the castle was not quite the same as being incapable of getting into the castle, but that was one of those small details in life that was better left alone for the moment. "So, you try it. We'll do some training later but not now. Instead, think about the room we need. I want a table to study at, with a good light, and you should go for whatever you can think of that might let you kip out if at all possible."

It was almost surreal to see the life that had slowly returned in some small measure to her face vanish again, leaving behind the same lost girl that he had first seen last night. The pointed reminder of her

inability to sleep, and probably why, was almost as effective as a Dementor. "Right." Even her voice was duller than it had been mere moments before.

Knowing that there was nothing to be done for it yet, as only time would give her the perspective she needed, Harry settled for watching her trigger the magic of the Room. When the door appeared, she jumped slightly, before moving over to open it. She glanced back at Harry for a moment before she strode into the room, and he followed her in.

The room was quite small, less than ten feet on a side. It was dark around the edges. A desk that looked surprisingly like McGonagall's sat in the middle, one lone Muggle-style desk lamp casting a focused cone of light upon the surface. A beat-up and frankly ugly sofa was located immediately behind the desk's chair. A slate-grey duvet was heaped messily on one end. Ginny, however, wasted no time and sank into the monstrosity with an almost palpable relief.

Curious about why she would find comfort in that hideous thing, but unwilling to invade what might be a very personal issue, Harry closed the door and sealed it with his wand using both a Locking Charm and a Proximity Alarm combination. Pulling out the book on wards from his bag again, Harry settled into the desk chair. Ginny was so close he could reach out and touch her if he wanted to. "Try to sleep a bit, eh?"

She kept her gaze averted but nodded slightly, lying down and curling about herself much like a cat might. After she settled the duvet over herself, only a few wisps of hair adorning her pale forehead and her brown eyes were discernable.

As Harry tried to find the spot in the text he wanted to begin re-reading from, Ginny's soft voice caught his attention. "Harry? You'll stay here, right?"

"Yeah. I'll wake you before I leave to meet your brother."

"Thanks, Harry."

“Anytime, Ginny. Anytime.”

The silent room and stark lighting made a surprisingly good study environment for Harry. The complete lack of outside distractions, coupled to the lack of potential visual distractions, allowed him to focus on the intricacies of wards and their construction remarkably well. He was trying to understand the subtle problem of attenuating a ward to the ambient magical energy supply, such that it was neither over- nor under-powered for a given use. The utilisation of buffer stages to strengthen fields around otherwise poor sites, or to provide deep power wells for critical infrastructure, did not alter the requirement for attenuation. It merely shifted it from part of the ward construction to the buffer construction. As he was chasing the concept of staged buffers and the inability to handle variable ambient fields, Ginny’s voice startled him from the fascinating text.

“Harry?”

Shaking his head briefly to bring his awareness back to the rest of the world, he made a noncommittal sound in response. It was coming close to the time he needed to leave anyway, so that meant she at least had a few hours’ rest.

“Why do you constantly seem so angry?”

Exhaling slowly, Harry tried to understand where the question was coming from. While he knew he had some mild . . . issues . . . that he needed to work through, particularly given the events of the summer, he felt that he did not exactly exude anger or the like. He opted to not turn and look at her, since her tone was soft and hesitant. By not looking at her, she might be willing to actually talk, rather than withdraw. “I’m not really sure what you mean, Ginny.”

“I’ve been trying to understand why you’re so, I don’t know, volatile or some such.” She paused for a moment before rushing her next words. “Why do you have such hate for us? For our . . . culture?”

Her line of questioning was in a different direction than he had feared, so it was easy for him to fall back into old arguments that he had hashed out many times with others. “For you? I don’t ‘hate’ you or most of the students at Hogwarts. I do have, err, contempt for your culture – rather, for the chosen state of pervasive ignorance and plausible deniability.”

“Ignorance? Deniability?” Her tone carried her confusion clearly. “What did we do? What did our parents do?”

Harry laughed bitterly. “Do? They’ve done nothing. Perhaps you should ask it the other way ‘round. What did this culture not do?”

Ginny’s sigh was quite loud, and her volume rose to match an almost tangible frustration. When he turned to face her, Ginny’s face conveyed irritation. “I don’t understand. I’m wanting to, but you’re not teaching me or explaining anything, Harry. Instead, you’re patronising me.”

Shrugging slightly, Harry held up his hands. She was right, after all. “All right, I deserve that. Let me give you just one example. The Statute of Secrecy. What’s it there for?”

“To protect us from discovery by Muggles.”

Harry tried not to laugh again at her simplistic answer, probably imparted straight from a Ministry text or pamphlet somewhere. “Right, to protect you from Muggles. Tell me, if a Muggle sees something magical, when efforts to keep it hidden fail, what happens?”

Ginny paused, but Harry could tell she knew the answer just as well as he did. “They get Obliviated.”

Nodding, Harry smiled faintly. “Precisely. So what exactly are you being protected from? Should they see anything, they’ll get mind-wiped. Is it really protection for you?”

Ginny was slower to respond to this one, a sign that she was starting to think about the question rather than parroting whatever she had

learned growing up or been told to tell others. “Well, in most places, they don’t burn people at the stake anymore, but they’d still expect all kinds of miracles from us. We’d never be able to live our own lives, we’d be enslaved.”

Harry laughed again; he really was unable to stop himself. “Right. Enslaved by Muggles? Who lack the Imperius Curse, or a means to overcome the Fidelius Charm? How exactly would they hold you against your will? You have magic, after all.”

Ginny shook her head after a moment. “I don’t know, Harry, okay? I’ve never really thought about it, I just trusted my dad’s explanations. I can see problems if I lose my wand, or something like that, but it doesn’t really answer whatever you’re pushing at. What does our hiding have to do with your dislike for us?”

Harry shrugged faintly. “Okay, you think about that one. Let me ask another question, though – and it’s related even if it doesn’t seem like it.” He waited until she nodded acceptance of the change. “If you see someone dying, but it’s in your power to help them live, would you? Assume they weren’t evil or somehow deserving of death.”

“Of course I would. And the Statute allows that.”

“Fair enough,” Harry agreed. “But what if it wouldn’t kill them, only maim them or leave them disfigured?”

“Err, that’s not covered in the Statute,” Ginny temporised. “I’d probably try to get them help – Muggle if possible, or ask for magical help otherwise.”

“And if you couldn’t find any help, then what? Would you step in and use magic to help them?”

“I think I probably would,” Ginny said after a long moment of playing with the duvet. “I think my dad could help me explain it if I had to.”

“Right. Now, one more. What if it wouldn't be anything as drastic as maiming – just a very serious, debilitating sickness for a few weeks. Would you help? This clearly would violate the Secrecy Statute.”

Wincing visibly, Ginny slowly shook her head. “Well, no, probably not. I'd get into all kinds of trouble if I did.”

Her answer was unsurprising, but it left him mildly disappointed all the same. “So your convenience is worth more than a Muggle's future life? The burdens they may have to carry that you could prevent?”

“No, I didn't mean it like that.” Ginny sat up, letting the duvet fall around her as she gestured vaguely with her hands. “I'd still try to get help, someone that was allowed to, or could work around the rules, or maybe know how to get whoever was hurt or so ill to proper care. Maybe even call St. Mungo's Mobile Emergency team, right? But I can't recognise the difference between a cold and something more serious easily.”

“I see,” Harry offered drily, knowing his tone was approaching a patronising form again. “So you'd want to help and would try to help through proper channels.” Harry then leaned forward, holding her eyes with his own. “But if they had major upheaval from a long illness when you could have prevented it . . . because the Muggle methods were too slow, or you were denied aid because it's only a Muggle . . . does that make you culpable? To their job loss? The impact it might have on their families? Their children? There is a continuum here, and you've drawn a line that says, ‘Here, I will help; there, it's not worth my time.’ Who chose that division, and why?”

Ginny kept her eyes on his, refusing to look away. But he could tell she was uncomfortable and facing new ideas. Finally, she simply frowned and looked at her fingers in her lap. “I don't know, Harry. I've never really thought about it, as I don't ever seem to go places where Muggles are that don't already know about our world.”

Harry had to give her credit. He was pushing fairly hard with these direct questions, and she was being both honest and was giving his questions serious consideration. It was more than he expected to get

from people when this conversation invariably came up. In many respects, she was far ahead of the curve for being open-minded.

“That’s fair, Ginny, that I’ll grant you. But think about these basic questions in more ways. We know that not all magical cures will work on Muggles. Sometimes magical methods require too much help from the body’s own magical core for Muggles to benefit. At the same time, there are hundreds of wounds, diseases, and disorders that simply aren’t dangerous or don’t exist in the magical community, because there exist magical cures or vaccines for them, or even emergency aid. Would you care to guess how many of those are used to aid the Muggles? The Muggles who die by the tens of thousands every year from these same illnesses or injuries?”

When Ginny looked up, he thought she might even be sad. “Er, from the tone you’re using, I’ll guess none.”

Harry nodded decisively. “Correct. Once upon a time, when the Muggles were going through the Dark Ages – a period the magical culture forced on them, no less – you were in some mild form of danger. For maybe two hundred years. But aside from that brief moment, you’re in more danger from the classes here than you are from the Muggles.” Motioning at the space all around them, Harry leaned back and smiled thinly at her. “The truth is, Ginny, you’re more of a danger to them than they are to you – unless they want you dead, of course. There is no magic that can save you from their most advanced weapons.”

Ginny paused at that thought, and he could tell it was another completely new concept. For Muggles to be in danger from magical folk – through something other than megalomaniacal Dark Lords – was probably a disturbing issue. “So maybe the Statute is there to protect them for us? From us? Though I don’t really think there’s much danger from us. Well, aside from those few problem cases.”

Harry shrugged absently, waving one hand in a see-saw motion. “More than likely, Ginny, that Statute is there for some political reason instead. It’s not a Statute of Secrecy – it’s really a Statute of Death. By withholding cures, withholding urgent care treatments that Muggles could never hope to equal . . . you, meaning all of this

community, condemn to death – or worse fates – more Muggles every year than all of the magical people that exist on this planet.”

Ginny was a little wide-eyed at his bald accusation. “Political reasons? You mean to further someone’s career? I have a hard time believing that.”

Realising it was time to leave if he was to meet George, Harry stood and nodded slightly. “You want to believe other people are as good natured as you are. That’s a nice ideal. Reality is different. Humans are only as altruistic as their desires, Ginny, and what some people desire is completely unacceptable. Don’t fool yourself into thinking otherwise – just because your desires are gentler, most people’s motivations aren’t so pure.”

“And this is why you hate us?”

Harry sighed. She was thinking, but there were too many new ideas, new questions for her to assimilate them in one session. She may not even agree with him after mulling the issues over. “I already told you, I don’t hate you. I find the social and historical setting of the magical world repugnant, and the wilful wallowing in ignorance grating. I have much bigger concerns than what so-and-so may personally think or feel about me, and given my view of your society here, well . . . you can safely guess that I’m not inclined to care anytime soon. At any rate, I need to go, so you can think about it if you want to. It won’t change things we’re working on if you don’t agree with me. I’d be surprised if you do, actually. Either way, we’re still friends, and I’ll still help you as you need it.”

Harry unlocked the door and was opening it when her final question caught him. “If we’re so . . . bad, why don’t you try to do something about it?”

Stepping into the hall, Harry looked back at her. Giving her the smile Neville indicated was a bit too feral, Harry asked, “Who says I’m not? I’ll find you in a couple of hours, Ginny.”

As Harry headed off to meet George, he admitted to himself that Ginny was likely to be an ongoing test case for his long-held beliefs.



Since it was now unavoidable that her training had to continue, that meant their level of regular interaction would likewise increase. Their close proximity would invariably wind up in long, more focused discussions on how he perceived magical society against how she did. While it was not something he had planned for, he could see how it would be useful in many ways. She was a strange sort of friend, possibly capable of becoming a best friend, but he could easily see coming to trust and value her opinion – a novel point of view – if she could actually open her eyes to the rigid construct that magical society was.

His own views had been hammered out in debates with much more experienced adults. If he could find ways to sway her to some of his views, or at least be more receptive to his ideas, then that was a skill he would use for the others he needed to win over. Even if he failed, he would still have picked up vital practice in both his approach and debate angles. Voldemort had already forced the original plan's timetable to speed up in some ways and slow down in others. He was slow in taking direct actions but fast in bringing a focal lens to bear on Harry.

The lack of input from Remus and Sirius was starting to grate in ways that Harry had failed to appreciate before. Previously, they all lived in each other's pockets, and isolation from the others meant space to think and recharge. At Hogwarts, he had too much time away from them, and fates were apparently conspiring to keep them apart. He was displeased to adjust to a new reality – when he most wanted to discuss something, there was no one around he trusted fully to do so with.

Harry's thoughts were interrupted when he spotted the twins and Ron heading toward the Great Hall as he was. Collectively, they seemed to spot each other at the same moment, everyone shifting their paths to meet in the third floor central stairwell hub. "Weasleys," he offered by way of greeting.

"Potters," Fred replied with a jovial slap on the back. "Let's adjourn to the path of sweets, shall we?"

As he was half-pulled, half-pushed into following Fred by George and Ron, Harry voiced the obvious. "It doesn't appear that there's much choice in the matter."

"He's so smart," George said loudly. "I knew we trusted our own little Dark Lord Rising for a reason."

"He's not so little, George," Ron muttered. "Blimey, you're hard to move. Look, err, Harry, would you just go with us? Save the drama?"

Harry grinned tightly at Ron, who looked very flustered. "Since you asked so nicely, Ron, I'd be happy to. Now, I know the where, but perhaps one of you chaps could suggest a why for it?"

Ron pointed to Fred, who in turn pointed to George. George tried to point to Ron before Harry rapped sharply on the back of George's hand with his fist. "Knock it off."

"Can't blame a fellow for trying, can you?" George asked while shaking his hand out. "Fred and I got a letter asking us to bring you to a little pow-wow. Our brothers want to meet and greet you."

"Brothers?" Harry asked in an icy tone. "There are three others, right? How many are we talking about here?"

"All of them!" Fred said brightly. "Looking forward to it, really. You know how we feel about mayhem and mischief. I've even brought some popcorn!"

Harry had to laugh when he saw Fred's bag of unpopped microwave popcorn. He was sure the twins knew, just as he did, that a bit of magic could make the popcorn pop perfectly in less than three seconds. "Right. So it's a show, then?"

Ron gave Harry a long look, before he said quietly, "Probably. All I'm saying is, I don't know what's going on, and I don't want to know, right? I don't even want to be there."

Harry smirked back before looking to the twins. "And you two?"

Fred nodded quickly. "Yeah, this might not be too pretty. Maybe they just want to say hello, but I wouldn't count on it. The letter wasn't exactly a friendly note. Kind of commanding, really."

"A show can go either way, eh?" George asked. After a moment, he continued, "Now, Percy's pretty easy to wind up, but I haven't seen anyone fluster Bill or Charlie in, well, years. Not since Mum caught them in the orchard with those three Muggle girls and the two empty bottles of Firewhisky, at any rate."

"Please," Ron groaned, "my ears ache at the mere memory."

As they approached the statue of the witch that guarded the tunnel to Honeydukes, Harry grabbed the twins by the arm. "So what's it worth to you if I can get them to throw a wobbly?"

Without missing a beat, Fred and George said in perfect synchronization, "A Galleon from each of us."

"Done!" Harry said, tapping the witch and giving the password. As he led the way down into the tunnel, it was easy to see the bright spot about half-way down the passage indicating others. With three human shapes moving about, and the expectation for the three missing brothers to be there, Harry was not overly concerned – but he kept his wand in hand anyway.

As they approached, the other three stopped moving and talking, turning to face Harry and their siblings. Harry stood off to one side and observed as the brothers exchanged hellos and slaps on the back, but it was obvious even having never met these three that things were a bit stiff and formal. He was able to tell who was who by the time their salutations were complete, though he was hard pressed to identify which was the largest threat.

As the others settled into a loose semi-circle facing him, Harry opted to just get right to point. They were missing lunch, after all. "Right, I'm Harry, you're a lot of Weasleys, and we're all here. So what's this all about, then? I can't imagine you guys popped over from Egypt or

Romania just to say hello, and I'm familiar enough with Percy's reputation to know he's never sneaked out of work at the Ministry just to be social."

Bill took the lead, partially by taking one moderate step in front of the others, and the rest by eyeing his siblings. "We've 'popped over' too much this month, Potter. Fred and George tell me you prefer things to be straight. So I'll lay it out that way. We want you to stay away from our sister."

Harry was amused, particularly as Fred and George had edged behind their brothers and were shaking their heads in quiet disagreement.

"Oh?" Harry asked, doing his best to sound surprised. "Really?"

Fred was holding up the bag of uncooked popcorn, waving it vaguely in Ron's direction, which enticed their brother to join them behind the newcomers. Harry admired the natural flare for life that the twins exuded.

Bill's sharp tone brought Harry's gaze back on the eldest brother. "Yeah, really. It's not amusing, either."

Deciding he would actually try to earn those Galleons, Harry tried to keep his voice level as he responded. "Let me guess. You lot vet all her boyfriends like this?"

Harry ignored Ron's reddening face and gaping fish-mouth, opting to keep his attention on the three unknown brothers. They were the variables in the moment; Harry knew he had little to fear from the youngest trio.

"Boyfriend?!" Charlie all but yelled. "Like hell you are! You'll leave her alone!"

Percy huffed as he pushed his stern and outdated glasses up his nose. "Really, there's no need for shouting. Mr Potter is supposed to be an intelligent young man." Turning to face Harry fully, Percy

continued, "No one else has dared date her more than once, so the question's academic."

"Right, how thoughtless of me," Harry offered quietly. "You only plan to Inquisition the ones that threaten to stick around."

Bill shook his head, his expression completely serious and, Harry assumed, aiming for intimidating. "It's not an Inquisition, Potter. It's a statement. You're not going to be her boyfriend, and you're going to leave her alone."

"Do you guys always let your incest-fuelled fantasies rule your logic?"

Harry's question may as well have been a grenade going off as Charlie and Bill visibly startled and paled. Percy, however, remained unaffected. "That's rather low of you, don't you think? And completely disgusting, if I do say so myself."

"Well, let's see then, shall we?" Harry asked drily. "You're threatening me off of being her boyfriend, but you admitted you would have done the same for anyone that tried to date her more than once. That means you don't want her dating. That means that you don't care about her happiness, only that she's available to give you the affection you want from her without competition. Which means in your subconscious, you probably harbour sexual desire for your sister, but in your conscience you know it's wrong, so you don't think about it beyond intimidating anyone male that threatens to get close to her, and that's only to satisfy your male urges to protect your perceived harem. Therefore, your incest-fuelled fantasies are wrecking your powers of reasoning."

Percy was gaping at him like a goldfish, while Bill and Charlie continued to appear decidedly ill. Fred and George, meanwhile, gave Harry a firm thumbs up while Ron looked like he was trying not to be violently sick all over the floor.

Harry adopted a look of horror. "I guess I have to take your silence for agreement. Shall I tell Ginny her brothers have such lurid fantasies about her?"

Harry's ability to keep his voice free from laughter was being pushed to the limit. He was using a technique of rapid speaking with tenuous connections to make a hypothetical argument solely to push their buttons, and it was working. He would have to tell Sirius that the 'advice' previously given on this method worked quite well. Granted, it was entertaining. He felt secure in winning the bet with the twins, but he wondered if the emotional scarring would be faint or not.

Fred lit off the popcorn, which made everyone jump and effectively killed the moment Harry had constructed. That was acceptable to Harry, as it allowed him to relax his façade of horror for a moment. When Bill and Charlie scowled at him while Percy lectured the twins, Harry asked, "You guys want to try again with the issue?"

Bill and Charlie tried to look intimidating again, but it was almost as if they acknowledged the effort was doomed from the start. Instead, Charlie offered quietly, "You're not safe to be around, and you've shown that many times. We want you to stay away from her. She's been hospitalised enough because of you."

"And that's all my fault, is it?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Bill countered. "But can you deny the point?"

Harry shook his head slowly. "Let's try a bit of logic again, yeah? I've been targeted by others since I was born. They are going to come after me no matter where I am. They will miss, I hope, which means everyone nearby is at risk. So if want your sister 'safely away', you need to take her home, since everyone in the castle is 'around' me enough to be 'not safe'."

Percy harrumphed loudly. "That may be true, but you have to agree that the farther away from you, the safer one is likely to be."

"Nope," Harry said sadly. "I have direct evidence that's just not so."

Bill turned and sharply gestured to the other three lurking in the back, eating popcorn. "What about you? Don't you think Potter's dangerous?"

George kept his attention on the popcorn, answering Bill around chewing. "Nah, we're disciples of Potter's. We like to think of ourselves as Potter's Wheels."

Harry laughed briefly. "That's better than Potter's Weasels, I suppose."

Bill glared at Harry for a moment before turning back to the others. "What about you, Ron?"

Ron held up both hands, full of popcorn though they were. "I'm staying out of it, Bill. But I think Potter's got the right of it – it's Ginny's choice, innit?"

"She doesn't know better," Percy stated sharply. "This is for her own good."

"So you think Ginny's a bimbo?" Harry fired back, incredulous at the words he was hearing. "She's too stupid to understand this?"

"Stop that!" Charlie growled. "You keep twisting everything around!"

"It's not my fault you're thinking with your hormones and your perceived superiority, not your brains," Harry shot back. "Act like an adult, and I'll treat you like one!"

"What the hell does that mean?!" Bill retorted, his anger visible on his face.

"It means," Harry hissed, letting his anger out a bit, "you're cowards. You should be having this conversation with Ginny, not me. It's her choice who she has for friends or boyfriends. It's her choice alone. If you want her to not spend time with someone else, you talk to her about it."

Bill rocked back, and Harry could tell his point was finally made with at least one of them. Percy looked disdainful of the idea, indicating he was still considering himself superior to his sister at the very least. Charlie, however, looked only furious. His tone was hard and cold when he spoke. "I'm not going to play word games, I'm just telling you flat out – keep away."

"Or what?" Harry asked, completely not intimidated by flexing muscles and testosterone posturing.

"Or you'll regret it," Charlie finished in the same tones.

"Oh, stop, you're scaring me," Harry replied in a monotone. Perhaps it was not as believable as he could have made it, so he added in a bored voice, "Really. Scary, shivers, all that."

Charlie alternated between naked fury and bafflement more than anything, apparently flummoxed that his efforts at intimidation failed utterly. Percy was silent but glaring with distaste, while Bill was shaking his head from side to side. "How is it that we've been defeated by a kid?" Bill asked no one in particular.

"Get over yourselves," Harry replied coldly. "I've gone toe-to-toe with Voldemort a few times. I have been hunted by vampires, Death Eaters, and werewolves. How are you lot supposed to intimidate me after that? What'll you do? Try to pound me? Try to hex me? Or maybe you'll just call me bad names?"

"Look," Bill finally offered, "can we try this again, but be more 'adult' about it?"

Harry rolled his shoulders, while motioning for Bill to stop. "No, we can't. You either have this discussion with your sister, or you don't have it. After talking to her, if you want to talk to me with her consent, fine. Until then, this topic is closed."



“Come now, Mr Potter,” began Percy stiffly, “our family is involved beyond our sister. Our brothers, our mother, have been involved in your petty schemes and wounded by these events. Are you saying we can’t talk to you about any of this?”

“That depends,” Harry replied. “If you want to know how and why, talk to me. If you want to threaten, pose dramatically, or demand isolationism, then go talk to your family and not someone uninvolved with how your family works. Now, since it’s clear we’re not going to agree on this, was there anything else you lot wanted to discuss? If not, I’m going to get some lunch and perhaps spend some time with my girlfriend.”

Harry wanted to laugh at the open frustration on the faces of the three eldest but managed to keep it under control. Having backed them into a corner on the issue, he was unwilling to put it past them that they might try hexing him. He gave them enough time to respond, but the only sounds were Fred and George munching on popcorn and Ron shuffling his feet.

“Right then. And for the record, boys,” Harry said as he put up a floor-to-ceiling shield to protect his back as he left, “lots of people have friends that are girls, but it doesn’t mean they’re a couple. It seems all I do is repeat myself, but Ginny and I aren’t together like you keep thinking.”

Nodding briefly to the twins, Harry turned and left, his wand gripped firmly. He was not comfortable with exposing his back to the newest brothers three, but if he backed away it would indicate he did – on some level – consider them threatening. By turning his back, he was conveying the opposite; the shield was just prudence against petulant children.

As Harry exited the secret passageway without incident, Floppy rose up and reverted to a ball cap with the brim low over his forehead. “Really, Harry, you missed an opportunity there,” Remus’ patient voice told him from the Hat.

“About Bill? Not really,” Harry replied, pushing his irritation away. “If he can’t grasp the simple concept of being direct, he wouldn’t be useful anyway. But the bigger issue is that if I failed to make him think of me as an equal, he could never be what the plan needs.”

“Calling him an incest-fantasising coward is so much better than being nice,” Floppy countered. “It really makes people appreciate all you have to offer.”

“Sarcasm, Floppy? It’s not catching, is it?”

“When in Rome, Harry, when in Rome.”

The Hat reverted back to a scarf that draped over his shoulder, leaving Harry to enjoy his own thoughts as he strode to lunch. It was shaping up to be a wonderful day. Depressed ‘girlfriend’, family rivalries, unknown agents working against him, and absent mentors – just what he needed to keep himself occupied. As he approached the Great Hall, Harry decided that a private lunch would be far more desirable and turned to the kitchens instead. He would eat on his own, study the intricacies of wards a bit more, then work with Ginny on some meditation drills to at least keep her making some kind of progress in something.

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Tue, 19 Sep 1995

“Err, Professor, having a cup of tea whilst discussing classes with a professor really isn’t my thing,” Harry offered as politely as he could, trying to indicate he would rather be eating breakfast than discussing this topic. He had hoped that eating breakfast before most other people came to the Great Hall would allow him to eat in peace, not be stalked by the faculty. “So I think I’ll decline your offer for a private meeting.”

“ Oh, no, no, no!” Slughorn said with a flourish. “You’ve misunderstood me! It’s a gathering of prominent members of our society! Why, I’ll have a Quidditch player or two drop by, some of the

department heads from the Ministry, and of course a select few students such as yourself.”

Harry perked up slightly. “Oh? It’s not just a bunch of students?”

“Not at all! You’ll find, Mr Potter,” Slughorn said with a warm smile, “that the connections you can make at a little gathering like this can be quite useful later in life. I have a few vampire friends that I’d normally invite, but, well, with the changes put in place I’m afraid that’s just not possible anymore.”

“Hmmm,” Harry offered noncommittally, though he was becoming acutely interested in the idea. “When is it, again?”

“The Saturday night of the first Hogsmeade weekend, six o’clock sharp,” Slughorn said with a smile. “May I count you in? You can bring a companion, naturally.” Slughorn smiled slyly for a moment. “You’re seeing Miss Weasley, of course, and she’s more than welcome. I daresay she would find many interesting people to talk to as well.”

Harry ground his teeth at the reminder of the public perception regarding the situation between himself and Ginny. “Err, right, yeah. I guess I’ll come, and I’ll see if Ginny would like to join me.”

“Excellent!” Slughorn said with tangible glee. “Simply excellent. I must run along, now, Mr Potter, I have some correspondence I need to finish up! I’ll see you in class this afternoon.” Slughorn ignored the Head Table, turned, and left the Great Hall at a fairly aggressive pace. Just as the potions professor cleared the doors, Ginny walked in, her eyes downcast and her steps shuffling somewhat. Silently, she took her seat next to him and started scooping small amounts of the food available onto her plate. Letting her have the peace she appeared to desire, Harry resumed eating his own breakfast.

“This is odd.” Ginny’s voice carried tones of confusion as she looked up from the morning post she had received. Harry had made it a habit to sit near a different group – or by himself – at every meal he ate in

the castle. Ginny invariably joined him, either getting up from where she had been sitting or merely finding him when she entered the Hall.

“What’s odd?” Harry asked out of politeness more than actual focus. He was preoccupied with the actions of his mentor. Cyril had suddenly re-appeared after days away and then promptly left again after handing over a terse note. Much like his other mentors, Cyril had simply gone to ground, and face-time was non-existent. Harry was still puzzled by it.

Harry –

Given the change of climate in events, I have had the elves move your possessions back to the Gryffindor dormitories. I will be in contact as I can during the days ahead, but there are too many things afoot for me to remain here constantly. I expect to hear of positive developments along your objectives when we meet next.

Cyril

Why he was being moved back into the regular dormitories was left unsaid. Either this was something related to the veiled challenge sent to the ICW regarding his own status, or there was some other political pressure coming to bear. While it was true that he had little to fear directly from any students at this point, given the myriad events of the nearly three weeks in the castle, the problem was that his personal safety did not translate into safety for those immediately around him. Dumbledore had agreed to that previously, earning him the private suite, so it was puzzling why the change was taking place now.

“It’s this letter from Bill, my brother,” Ginny began. Her words made him pay more attention than he had been. “He’s asking me if I think it’s safe to be around you. He’s also hinting that he has concerns over what the nature of our interactions are.”

When she looked up at him, Harry could easily see the surprise and confusion on her face. It was a pleasant change of pace from the depths of depression she had slowly been settling into. As she watched him, however, her eyes gradually narrowed. “All right, Harry.

I can almost feel that you know something about this. What's going on?"

Harry was certain she was bluffing. She could never get past his mental shields; that was a given. "I have no idea what you're on about."

"Don't lie to me, Harry," she warned. "You want me to be honest with you, you should be honest with me."

Now Harry was confused. She radiated certainty, but it was inconceivable that she could tell when he was being evasive. "How would you know the veracity of that, one way or the other?"

"How do you tell Fred and George apart?" she countered.

"Err," Harry stammered, seeking time. There was simply no way he was going to answer that here, if at all. But how he could evade both questions was unclear. It was, in fact, quite unlikely that he could, if she really was able to tell when he was less than honest.

"Let us help," Fred offered, dropping with George into the seats opposite them. "We couldn't help but hear Ginny's question and your lousy handling of it, Harry."

Harry looked back down the table toward where he had seen them before they came over, noting that the twins had been sitting at least fifteen feet away and through a dozen people. Looking over at them, now sitting opposite him, Harry arched one eyebrow, calling them on their misdirection.

"Not now, oh mighty Pottery Lord," George said. "Listen, Ginny, you remember we wanted a word with Harry on Sunday? Well, that was at Bill's request. He wanted a word with Harry, here."

Fred picked up the conversation seamlessly. "Got more than a word, though, he got a right good verbal lashing. Our Master Potter is quite the fellow to pierce you with a knife a few dozen times, when a slap would have been just as effective."

Ginny groaned and closed her eyes, then rested her head on the table. "Let me guess. He wanted Harry to stay away from me, right? He said some pretty wild things at St Mungo's."

"Right in one, Ginny," George replied. "Knew you had it in you. Of course, Harry had it in him to educate Bill on the topic. Made him look like a lump of clay, when he was done. It was beautiful. But based on your question, well, seems like Bill took the moulding to heart, once he got his head out of his arse."

Ginny was silent for a bit while Harry eyed the twins. They had no apparent qualms about ratting out their brother, but then they did have a stated ambition to cause mischief and mayhem. Nothing limited that mayhem to people outside the family. Ginny finally spoke up again. "There's more to this than you've told me, isn't there?"

"Does it matter?" Harry asked, cutting off the twins. "You did receive a letter about his worries. Nothing wrong with looking out for your loved ones, is there?"

"It's not the looking, Harry," Ginny muttered. "It's the manner of the looking."

"See, Harry, that is how a proper leader of the light would have talked to Bill. She'll make Dumbledore proud one day, our Ginny will." Fred was smirking fairly heavily as he said this. "The way you talked to Bill, though, it's clear you're the next Dark Lord Rising."

"I can't wait," George gushed while rubbing his hands in glee. "Think of all the people we can cow with Harry leading us."

"You're right, Harry," Ginny said before the twins could go on. "I don't really want to know right now. I'll deal with Bill on my own."

"Right, then," Harry said brightly. "Now that that is settled, you two want to tell me how you 'heard' us talking through all the bleating sheep?"

Fred held up something that looked like a bit of string, and winked. "A new toy. Let's adjourn to a more private locale, and we can discuss it, eh?"

Harry shrugged. "Ginny? Joining or staying?" Ginny pushed the remains of her plate aside, grabbed her bag, and stood with Harry.

"Where are you two off to this morning, then?" Fred asked once they were out of the Great Hall. "Charms, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Now explain about your toy."

"Right," George agreed, handing over another one. "We call them Extendable Ears. Just toss one end at a door or near a group of people, and it'll stretch out to place a tiny magical microphone by it. Then listen on the other end."

Harry studied it closely as they walked toward the Charms and Transfiguration classroom corridor. "How far will it go?"

"Up to forty-two feet," Fred replied. "We thought we'd get the drop on life that way. We've been trying to add a Disillusionment Charm to the extension to make it less noticeable, but it just doesn't work right with the Extruding Neck Hex we built the base with."

"But it performs brilliantly!" George continued. "We've been testing it for a few days now, and we've got the volume control down. I've got high hopes for these. Lots of opportunities for mischief, if you ask me."

Ginny reached over and touched the stretchy material Harry held. "Very nice. If I catch you using these on me, you'll not be pleased."

"Tried using one in other magical settings yet?" Harry asked, ignoring the idle threats between siblings.

"What d'you mean?" Fred asked. "It works here, we know that."

“No, no,” Harry replied. “You know how Hogwarts fireplaces can be used to communicate, but not move about? Have you tried using one through the intra-school Floo network, all by itself? Say, on the Slytherin common room? Or perhaps in an interesting Ministry fireplace?”

“That’s brilliant!” Fred murmured. “Quick, George. Back to the House! This is far too important for wasted time in classes! Cheers, Harry, Ginny!”

Ginny groaned faintly as the twins scurried off down the hall. “You know you’ve just eliminated any chance of privacy for everyone in the castle, don’t you?”

Harry shrugged. “It’s not like you’re not already in a proverbial fishbowl, is it? Just a couple more lost souls swimming around. What’s the worst that will come of it?”

Ginny looked at Harry with her eyes wide. “You did not just jinx yourself like that, did you?”

Harry smiled faintly. “Well, they haven’t caught me with their latest efforts, now have they?”

“How do you do that, Harry?” Ginny stood facing him in the hallway, and he could tell it was deserted. Only the portraits were nearby, but he did not trust them much. Ginny’s eyes were still dead, but she was asking anyway. “How do you know which twin is which? Or tell what they’ve charmed or hexed?”

She was starting to show signs of life, at least so far this morning. Perhaps she was ready to start catching herself from falling further into the spiral of darkness. Curiosity was one way to drive that slow path to recovery, giving her something else to focus on. Harry decided to give a simplistic yet true answer. “You’re not going to share this with your brothers, are you? I sort of enjoyed redirecting their efforts last night on that McLaggen fellow. Prancing on the table while singing ‘God Save the Queen’ seemed fitting, somehow.”



Ginny smiled faintly in return. "At least you haven't had to listen to him prattle about Quidditch for the past year. But no, I won't tell anyone."

Shrugging, Harry gestured toward their Charms classroom. "I can sort of, err, read magical signatures – you know, the bit of residue magic leaves behind when used. From that, I can tell who is who, if I've met them before and remember the pattern. With the pranks, it's more telling that something's not right and knowing what that might mean, rather than being able to tell you exactly what's going to happen."

"Really? I've never heard of that before."

"It's apparently one of the rarer Gifts," Harry offered vaguely. Seeing that Flitwick was not around and nothing appeared ready for the students, Harry opted to take advantage of the moment. "Look, we've got several minutes before people will show up for class, since we left breakfast so early. Will you listen to me for a moment, Ginny?"

She nodded, but he could tell she was becoming more uncomfortable as her eyes flickered back and forth between what he thought was his shoulder and his gaze on her.

"Listen carefully. You are going to die. You cannot change that."

Startled, she looked at him with bright eyes. "What?"

"Everyone dies, Ginny. Everyone." Harry paused to be sure she was hearing him and not over-focusing on only part of the message. "Worrying about it changes nothing. You have a birth-day, the day you were born. You also have a death-day, the day you will die."

She shook her head slowly for a moment, and he could tell she was very uncomfortable. "Yeah, I know that, Harry."

"You know it, but you're not accepting it, Ginny," Harry said softly. "In the past, you've been able to walk around, casually thinking 'some day before I die, I want to do such and such.' That's normal. Lately, though, you've been walking around thinking a short mantra of 'I don't

want to die' thanks to Riddle. But the other attitude is the right one – some day, you will die. There is nothing you can do to alter that fact. You will not get advanced notice. You need to embrace your death. Your obsessive focus right now on what you fear, what you believe will come too soon, is killing you just as surely as if I stabbed you."

Ginny was silent for a long time before she met his gaze again. "Why are you telling me this?"

Harry sighed and ran one hand through his hair. How was he to explain ideas that he had only come to understand after things became so dangerous to him and others? He wanted her to understand what he had learned the hard way, to find some way to accelerate her acceptance of the inevitable. "Only after you accept that you're going to die will you be able to move past it. It helps you to focus on what's important and what only seems important. When you accept death, then you can learn how to exercise what little control we have over when or how death comes."

Ginny shuddered briefly, but her head stayed up and her dull eyes seemed close to overfull. "I don't want to die, Harry. There's too much I want to do yet. I can't just accept death like you do."

Harry sighed. The idea had been conveyed, but she had not grasped the real message. Perhaps it was still too early after all. "Wanting has nothing to do with it. I want death to come right now no more than you do, but that doesn't change the fact it will come for me. There was a Muggle author some years ago, sort of ahead of his time. He wrote a bit about the idea, though he never really appreciated it fully, not like the warrior castes of old. 'Under six feet o' dirt tis less easy to laugh; But I'm gay whilst I linger on top of the land.' If you can accept that it has to happen, then you can move on to try and have some influence over the moment it will come – as much as any mortal may. Think about it, Ginny. You're not dead yet."

Ginny said nothing in return, so Harry sank into a seat at random. Ginny sat next to him but kept her bag in her lap as she played with the straps. "I think I'm learning how to hate your Mr Riddle."

Her whispered confession broke the silence, easing the bit of strain that Harry had been feeling after their prior conversation. “He’s a right bastard, isn’t he? Funny thing is that Riddle really is a bastard – and a half-blood, too.”

“Isn’t there some old witch’s tale about gaining power over someone by knowing their true name?” Ginny asked. “Can’t you use that somehow?”

“It’s true in some ways, I suppose, but not in others,” Harry replied after a moment’s thought. “If you know someone’s true name, then you have to know that person on some level. So you’d understand a bit about their history, their life experiences . . . and in a way, that is a power over them. But it’s not a magical form of power. It’s simply understanding them well enough to see things from their perspective to some extent. That helps you to figure out how to deny them what they’re after.”

“Deny them?”

“A great general of armies named Sun-tzu wrote about strategies for winning several thousand years ago,” Harry explained. “The most effective way to win a war is not to kill your enemies, but wreck their plans – what they are after, what they are trying to achieve.”

“Is that what you’re doing, then?”

“I’m hoping for quite a bit more than that, Ginny,” Harry murmured. “Quite a bit more.”

Their private conversation had to end as a few other students drifted into the classroom, but that was all right with Harry. He had given Ginny more things to ponder, though so far she had yet to argue with him. He hoped if he could get her internal focus to change, she would climb out of her growing depression and fears to really start training as hard as he wanted her to. Until then, he just had to be patient, no matter how much he disliked waiting.

By eight o'clock that night, however, Harry was even more frustrated. He had found his home once more void of other humans, goblins, or vampires and had been left to fend for himself. Hedwig had been a happy companion, though she seemed rather agitated for reasons he was unable to discern. Having a close relationship with such an intelligent creature was both a blessing and curse – in this case, a curse because he felt he should have been able to understand what she was upset over.

Master Gata had spent their time together discussing Ginny's physical conditioning regime that Harry had instated. That led to a discussion on how to gauge her body's ability to handle the stresses of school, training, and her newfound predicament in the big picture. After a solitary dinner interrupted only by feeding scraps to Hedwig, Harry returned to the castle, only to remember that he was now back to living in the dormitories. Even Floppy had been uncommunicative lately, and Harry was worried about his sanity if he was missing the verbal sparring with an obnoxious, unfortunately animate object.

He was greeted upon his return by one of Mrs Figg's Kneazles in the Entrance Hall. He could not tell which one it was, but it studied him warily for a moment before it slinked off into the shadows. Taking that as one more omen for an enjoyable conclusion to the day, Harry trudged his way to Gryffindor Tower, ignoring the whispers or stares that met him as he passed others in the corridors.

The Fat Lady glowered and huffed, but she opened anyway. Harry did not even have to ask or threaten her, so in some small way he had at least a partial victory for the day. As he stepped into the common room, however, he was reminded again of the surreal nature of the Hogwarts community. While there were only a few students about, everyone present stared at him in silence.

"Right, then," Harry said loudly. "I've been asked to return to my 'House' as it were. Nothing to see here, move along, move along," he finished with waving his hands about as though directing the stares away.

“Harry?” Ginny’s voice from behind him was a surprise, and from her tone, she was as surprised to see him in the common room. “What’s going on?”

Harry shrugged slightly. “Nothing major. I’ve been relocated to the Gryffindor dormitories.”

“Why?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Oh.” After a moment, she grabbed his elbow and steered him to a sofa by one of the fires. He sank onto it without protest when she gave him a mild push, and she dropped into the seat next to him, her bag thumping to the floor rather splendidly. “Your ‘trapped in a glass bowl syndrome’ bothering you, then?”

Harry smiled faintly. “It’s nice to know I can keep secrets from you so easily.”

Ginny smiled in turn, though it failed to reach her eyes. “Just so long as we have that straight.”

Harry took a moment to make sure no one was in eavesdropping range. “Ginny, there’s a . . . meeting of sorts I’m supposed to be at on Saturday. Remus and, er, others will be there, too. It’s the group of people working on our little Riddle problem, among other things.” Harry stopped to check again that no one was near enough to listen in. “Remus indicated you could come along, if you wanted to. Meet the others, that sort of thing. I thought I’d offer, since you’re sort of stuck in this mess.”

Ginny studied him closely for a while before she nodded slightly. “As long as you think it’s safe, okay.”

Harry made a waffling motion with his left hand. “Safe? Yeah, I suppose. But some of our . . . allies aren’t human. Some of the other races are a bit sexist, really, and you may not like how they ignore you.”

“Goblins, then?”

“You could tell that . . . oh, right, Bill works for Gringotts. I guess he told you about it?”

Ginny winced a bit. “Yes, I’ve been told that girls are seen and not heard during business, and that the more senior and powerful the goblin, the more ‘junior wives’ he has.”

“Right, then,” Harry said after a moment. Ginny did not look thrilled with the idea of dealing with goblins, but there was not much he could do about it. “I need to get Dumbledore’s approval to take you, but that shouldn’t be an issue. I haven’t decided if I’m going to invite him to be there as well.”

“Let me know, then,” Ginny said with a nod.

“Yeah.” Harry was uncertain that asking her to go to such a meeting in their current confused state was the right thing to do, but it would have to happen sooner or later. Starting to trust her more now, in little things, would hopefully make trusting her with the bigger things more palatable later. “Eh, Ginny, when was the last time you met with Remus?”

Ginny looked up from her books that she was pulling out of her bag. “I just came from a meeting. Why?”

“Tonight?!” Harry was unable to stop himself from growling slightly. “That berk, he’s avoiding me. I wonder if he’s the one behind the lemming caper . . . “

“Lemmings?” Ginny asked cautiously. “Do I want to know?”

Harry sighed, waving it off. “I don’t want to talk about it. I think I owe him a bit of something, that’s all.”

Ginny kept her eyes on him for a while before she shrugged and went back to pulling out her Transfiguration text. As she started reading,

Harry leaned back and tried to grasp what was so important to his mentors and why they were suddenly all unavailable or unwilling to discuss recent events. There was something more going on than he could perceive, so the question remained how to get it resolved.

Before he could get too much further with his thinking, Fred and George came down the stairs from the boys' dormitory side and spotted him on the sofa. They made a perfectly straight line in their path to him, vaulting over anything in the way such as furniture or people. "Harry!" George cried as they got closer. "You're smashingly brilliant!"

Fred squeezed himself in between Ginny and Harry, causing Ginny to leave with a huff as she moved over to a table to study. "Yeah?" Harry asked, as Fred made himself more comfortable by not sitting half in Harry's lap. "You're just now realising the obvious?"

George dropped into a chair facing the sofa Harry and Fred sat on, grinning faintly. "Yes, well, perhaps I should rephrase that. Your brilliant idea about the Floo worked like a charm."

"No pun intended!" Fred agreed.

"How well?" Harry asked, thinking of the device's possible uses.

"Eh," Fred said while waving his hand in a back-and-forth manner. "We need to find a way to cancel the noise of the fire. Never realised just how loud burning wood is." George nodded his agreement.

Harry thought about the problem for a bit. "Sounds like you need a magical version of a band-pass filter. Ever heard of those?"

Fred and George shook their heads in negative unison so perfectly in synch that Harry was again amused by the non-verbal messages the two seemed to live off of. Magical twins were something else to ponder. "Think of it like this. If you're in a room that's all the same colour of, say, blue . . . and then if you put something in there a slightly different shade of blue, it'd be hard to find. But if you took a picture of the room first, in the initial condition, you could subtract that

out from the later picture – and then the new object would show up all by itself and be easy to see.”

Fred nodded after a moment. “Yeah, that makes sense, but it wouldn’t work here, would it? The sound of the fire isn’t some constant thing, it’s always changing.”

George, though, was rubbing his nose. “But if you could somehow cut that out . . .”

“Right,” Harry said. “That’s what I was getting at. The trick is you want to remove the variable noise source. So what if you built two microphones into the end? One aimed out, and one aimed backwards. The backwards one should mostly get the fire, while the one facing out will get the fire and whatever is on the other side. Take out the sound of the fire, and . . .”

“Wow,” Fred whispered, “it just might work. D’you know how to do magic for that?”

Harry shook his head. “Nope, not a clue. I’m sure you’ll figure something out, though.”

Before anyone could say anything else, a shriek resounded from the stairwell and Ron came pelting into the common room. He was waving about excitedly, saying something to Ginny very loudly and much too fast to be intelligible. For her part, she appeared vexed that her studying had been interrupted again, and more so that it was her brother doing the interrupting.

“Spiders,” Fred whispered next to him. “Ron’s terrified of them.”

“And how d’you know that’s what has him like this?” Harry asked, suspicious that the twins had done something deliberate.

Fred shrugged briefly. “We don’t, not really. But every time he walks through a spider’s web that has a spider in it, this is what he does.”



“Yeah,” George added softly, “you’d think he’d be over it by now. We tried to scare it out of him years ago, but it just made it worse.”

“Scare it out of him?” Harry wondered aloud. “With what? A spider carrying a box of food?”

Fred whistled briefly. “Hear that, George? We should try that one next. Great idea, Harry.”

Chuckling at the mere vision of what it might do to Ron, Harry wondered about the mayhem side of the twins’ almost unified personality. In many respects, it reminded him of Sirius and Remus when they descended into childhood brawling with little hexes and jinxes cast back and forth, trying to one-up the other constantly. Ginny slammed her books down and stood up before marching over to where Harry was sitting with the twins. Ron was sitting at the table she had left behind, his head slowly thumping against the hard wooden surface.

“Harry,” Ginny started, “Ron just asked me something rather unexpected. He’s got this incredible fear of spiders, but he thinks you don’t fear anything at all. Ron said he learned that when you handled a problem recently, and he witnessed it. He wanted to know if you could help him get over his, err, spider problem.”

“Spiders, eh?” Harry asked slowly. “These two told me the truth, then?”

“Yeah.” She seemed indifferent to the idea, but he could tell she was irritated with having her attention broken from her class work.

“Maybe I can help him,” Harry admitted after a moment. “I could make it worse, too, you know. Like they probably did.” He said this with a jerk of his thumb toward her other brothers.

“Life is full of risks. Isn’t that what you’ve been trying to tell me?” She did not phrase it as a question by much; it came across as more of a pointed barb egging him on. Either she was truly annoyed at

another familial interruption to her plans, or she shared some traits in common with the twins.

“What’s he got against spiders?” Harry finally asked as Ginny and twins watched him.

“He’s always been afraid of them, but now, thanks to Hermione, he thinks they’ll suck his eyeballs out,” Ginny said with an airy wave of her hand. “She didn’t know about his phobia, but during first year she told him that they feed off the juice of things. Ron reckons that, sooner or later, they’ll realise eyeballs are the perfect meal.”

The twins started laughing hard at that announcement, while Harry just sat there in shock. “What?”

“Eyeballs, Harry, eyeballs.” Ginny had a bit of a smirk on her face, which Harry was happy to see despite the reason for it being there.

“So he needs to find a way to see a spider and not visualise a juice-sucking monster?”

Ginny threw her hands into the air while the twins managed to get their laughing under control. “How should I know? He just thinks you can help him get over the fear. He’d better do it soon, too, since Hagrid’s planning for a live Acromantula lesson.”

Harry thought about it for a few moments while Ginny stood with her hands on her hips, one foot tapping away in obvious impatience. Finally, Harry had an idea that might work, or it might not, but either way he could honestly say he tried something. “All right. D’you think Hermione might be willing to help us?”

“Hermione?” Ginny looked doubtful that Harry had a clue as to what he was asking for.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “You know, his girlfriend that embarrasses him.”

“Just checking, Harry. I’ll go up to the dormitories and find out. You do know that she’s still irritated with you, right?”

Ginny walked off without waiting for his answer, but the twins were still there and smiling broadly. “Is this a popcorn moment, Harry?” Fred asked solemnly, his voice completely out of place for the words.

“I dunno about popcorn,” Harry retorted, “but earplugs might not be a bad idea.”

“I foresee,” George said in a drifting nasally voice imitating Trelawney, “a dark confrontation for young Ronald.”

Fred leaned over and adopted an eager expression. “But will he survive?”

“It looks rather grim for Mr –“

Their conversation stopped as Ginny came back down, Hermione in tow behind her. The brunette had a decidedly unfriendly look for Harry, but that had been the norm for the past few days. “What do you want?” she asked brusquely.

“Right, thanks for coming down, Hermione.” Harry tried to be as polite as he could, since he wanted her to at least listen to the request before telling him where to go. “Ron wants to get over his arachnophobia, and asked if, err, we could help. I have an idea, but it really needs you to volunteer for it. You are the one that made his fear what it is, as I was informed. Are you willing?”

Hermione cut a withering glance at Ginny before her focus returned to Harry. Her expression made it clear she had no trust in his judgement whatsoever. “What are you going to do?”

Harry shrugged briefly. “Make his adrenaline gland explode.”

“What?!” Her response was not quite a shout or a screech, but it definitely pierced the inner sanctum of his skull and reverberated a few times.

Shaking his head side to side and doing his best to ignore the snickers from the three Weasleys, Harry did his best to look contrite. "Sorry, Hermione, I was being metaphorical. I thought you'd appreciate it."

"Don't say things like that, Harry," she complained. "You're scary sometimes, and I can't tell when you're being serious. What I meant was, what will you use me for?"

"Yeah, yeah, so I've heard lately," Harry muttered. "Look, it's much faster to do it than describe it in detail. I can promise you it won't hurt you in the slightest, the effects wear off after exactly five minutes, and it might help Ron. So are you willing or not?"

"Erm," Hermione hedged for a few moments, "it's not going to be embarrassing or something, is it?"

"Well," Harry said slowly, "I wouldn't think so, but I don't know what you'd find embarrassing. There's no nudity, no pain, not much of anything but one Sticking Charm and a temporary bit of transfiguration. I've done both spells loads of times, though not quite in this combination."

Hermione flushed at his answer, but he could tell she was torn between wanting to help Ron and wanting to avoid Harry's sense of humour. "If it won't hurt, and you really think it might help Ron, then . . . all right?"

Her reluctance was clear, but then Harry could see how she wound up in the supposed house of the brave rather than the house of the brainy. Perhaps Floppy knew a thing or two on what to do with scared little kids after all. "Excellent," Harry told her with a smile. "Oi, Ron! Get over here."

Ron came over whilst dragging his feet every step of the way. The score or so of students in the common room had given up any pretext of doing anything other than watching the strange drama unfolding by the fire, but Harry was doing his best to ignore them. When Ron

finally arrived, he looked a mixture of terrified and resigned. “Why am I having second thoughts about this?”

Harry waved him off. “Ginny said you wanted someone to help you with your irrational fear. Yeah?”

“Now?!” Ron hissed. “In the middle of the common room?”

Harry raised his hands as though warding off the question. “Would you rather it be in the middle of a fight to the death?”

Ron glowered and grumbled for a minute, before he settled down when Hermione stepped next to him and briefly held his hand. “Yeah, okay. What d’you want from me?”

Harry smiled, thinking this was going to be far easier than he expected. “I want you to turn, face Hermione – let go of her hands, she’ll need them – right, now take a couple of steps back, perfect, perfect. Now, Ron, stand still. Hermione, you stay where you are, too.”

Ron said nothing, but Hermione gave him a rather nervous glance. “Uhm. Okay.”

“Excellent. Oh, by the way, Ron,” Harry said with his wand out, “I just put a Sticking Charm on your feet. Try not to move, you’ll only look silly. Now, are you ready? And you, Hermione?”

Not bothering to wait for a response, Harry meticulously transfigured Hermione’s body – careful to leave only her head alone – into an appropriately sized black widow spider’s body. Since he intended for her head to remain unmodified but to have the overall proper dimensions as a real spider, the incredibly vast multi-legged body that reformed around her gave Harry a long pause.

The sight before him was almost enough for Harry to feel an echo of Ron’s primal fear, which was being loudly broadcast with the wailing and arm thrashing coming from the lanky redhead. For a moment, Harry was worried that Ron might break his legs off trying to get away

from the scene. A mad scramble of the other students fleeing the common room left many desks and chairs overturned, while the twins huddled by the fire, bug-eyed.

“That’s cruel, Harry.” Ginny’s voice was in his ear so she could be heard over Ron’s banshee imitation. “You put his fear of spiders in direct conflict to his feelings for Hermione.”

“Well, I thought it was a clever idea,” he nearly shouted back. “Didn’t you?”

“Oh, it’s quite good, and quite evil. Really, that’s very disturbing.” She shuddered briefly as they watched Hermione’s mouth open and close silently as her multi-faceted body moved about, alternately getting closer and farther with Ron. “I think you may have broken him.”

“If he’s broken, then so’s his fear. Besides, it’ll wear off in another . . . four and a half minutes.” Harry finally pulled his eyes away from the horrid yet fascinating tableau, and took Ginny’s elbow. “My work here is complete. Shall we away for a brief stroll to the library? I really don’t want to be here when she gets her vocal cords back.”

“Please. I don’t think my ears can take much more of this.”

With the Fat Lady’s portrait closed behind them, the lingering yells and sobs followed them toward the library. “D’you think this will help Ron?” Harry asked after a while. “I really wasn’t trying to be cruel. Surely he can’t see spiders as eyeball sucking demons now, can he?”

They were almost to the library, and Ginny pushed him toward a bench in the corridor by an over-sized window. Sinking down to it, she gestured for Harry to sit next to her. “The emotional devastation will be a bit hard to predict,” she said after a moment. “I doubt his fear will be gone, but it’s definitely going to be different.”

There was a mostly comfortable silence between them. Ginny still did not display quite the same vibrant, fiery personality she had been a

few days prior. But at the same time, she was no longer sinking deeper into despair. If he had to guess, Harry would state that she was no better or worse than she had been that morning – sort of locked into a holding pattern for emotional turmoil.

“Feeling better, Ginny?” he finally asked quietly.

“Not really,” she said after a bit. “I’m just trying to . . . not think about it much.”

“Are you able to sleep now?”

She sighed slowly. “Some. Not as much as I think my body is telling me it needs, but some.”

Harry slowly reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. “Let me know if I can help, right?”

She nodded but said nothing else, and he let his hand drop, feeling that the message had been conveyed fully.

“So, based on your passing comment at breakfast, I take it Bill’s not too keen on me, eh? Nor your other brothers?” Harry could understand their point of view, even if he thought it was a bit narrow minded. Still, she was part of their family, and their desires to see her unharmed made perfect sense. That did not change the reality that it was her decision, or perhaps her parents’ decision, on whether to associate with him, but Harry really could not hold it against her siblings if they were feeling protective.

“I don’t know, Harry, not really,” she replied. “I think it’s more . . . fear of the unknown. No one really knows where you’ve been or what you’ve been doing . . . then you show up, bad things happen around you, so what are they supposed to think?”

Harry laughed mirthlessly. “I’m not saying their opinion isn’t warranted, Ginny. I’m just wondering if I’m going to have to keep looking over my shoulder for your family.” Harry let the silence stretch out. There was another topic he wanted to discuss, but he was unsure if it was worth

asking just yet. When he felt that a topic change would not feel awkward from the silence, Harry started again. "Ginny? What's the deal between you and Malfoy?"

She froze completely, and it was obvious that she had even stopped breathing. Without looking at him or doing more than clenching her hands, she replied very stiffly, "I don't know what you're asking about."

Sighing, Harry turned and straddled the bench, facing her completely though she remained in profile. "I'm not going to push, not right now, but I'd have to be a right idiot to not make the connections. Your brothers read me the riot act about how you used to be, and I even saw a few signs of it myself on the train ride. But ever since Malfoy got kicked out, you haven't been like that at all, and everyone keeps commenting on it. So what's the story? It's clear you weren't too chuffed with him."

"Harry," Ginny finally started in a deathly quiet voice, "there are things I really, really can't talk about. Remember what I told you before? In the infirmary? This is, well . . . his father has this . . . I don't know how to explain it. I'm sorry."

"Okay, Ginny," Harry said after a moment. "But if I understand what you're trying to get at, as long as that family has something to hold over you, you can't talk. Is that about it?"

Slumping into a more natural posture, Ginny nodded. "That's it exactly."

"Well, it's not much, but it's a start." Harry knew his statement probably made one kind of sense to Ginny, in that he would eventually find out the truth from her when she could tell him. In reality, he now had more useful information to relay to Edgar, such that it might accelerate tracking down whatever was going on and neutralising it.

"By the way, Harry," Ginny's voice interrupted his thoughts. "I agree with you at least a bit about magical society. I've been . . .



unhappy . . . with some parts of it for a while. I'd like to see things made better. I just don't know how."

"Well –" Harry was cut off as two yowling and screeching cats came around the corner and all but flew past them, disappearing around another corner. The first one looked suspiciously like Mrs Norris, while the second one was clearly a Kneazle. The after-glow of a magical cat was lingering, but they were moving far too fast for him to ever identify which one of Mrs Figg's cats it actually was. A muffled shout came from where the cats had disappeared to, and then Professor McGonagall was striding around the corner.

When her eyes lit upon Harry, she altered her path to reach them directly. "Mr Potter," she said frostily, "I believe I need to see you in my office. Now."

Shrugging to Ginny, Harry gave a half-wave to the redhead and followed along as McGonagall made a trail back down the corridor. Unsure of precisely what he was in trouble for at the present moment, Harry opted to remain silent as the trek continued. When they reached her office, she held the door open and closed it sharply behind herself as she followed him into the room.

"Sit!" she all but barked at him.

Doing as he was told, Harry strived to wear a pleasant and benign expression. "Yes, Professor?"

"You will explain to me why you terrorised the entire common room of your house tonight!" Her expression was frankly disapproving, and she looked ready to lock Harry in the dungeons.

With a sigh, Harry explained exactly what had happened, why, and how. He did his best to recount the discussions and repeat the words exactly as they had been said, though he knew in a few places he was paraphrasing at best. When he was done, McGonagall was still glaring at him but also shaking her head from side to side as though in disbelief.

“Mr Potter, you are already aware of the rules in this castle. Casting magic upon another person is expressly forbidden, with or without their permission! The only time you may be asked to do so is by a professor in a classroom setting. Regardless of how impressive your spell work was, you know these rules!”

Harry shrugged a bit. “I know it’s a rule, yes, but it doesn’t seem to be enforced much, so . . . it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“A good idea?!” If anything, Harry realised his off-hand comment had not improved anything. “Madam Pomfrey is right now handing out a Calming Draught to nearly every student that was present in the common room tonight. I will tell you something else that has not been enforced lately, and that is your assigned detentions. You should have been serving them with Mr Filch this month, but he has been absent. Therefore, you will serve the remainder of them with Mrs Figg. Perhaps this will keep your idle hands from fomenting further chaos!”

“Err, yes, Professor,” Harry said after a moment. It really had been too good to be true that he would escape months of detention through mere technicalities.

“Very well. I have no further questions for you. But if you use magic on others once more in this castle outside of a sanctioned or justifiable situation, you will not like the consequences, Mr Potter. I will not give you any more slack in these matters, regardless of who asks for it.” McGonagall stared hard at him until Harry felt himself obligated to nod his acceptance. “You may leave, unless you have any questions for me?”

From her tone, it was clear that she expected none but was carrying through with the formality of it. Still, seeing her stand there in her formal professor’s robes and hat reminded him of a question he very much wanted an answer to. He had asked Luna at lunch, and she suggested he ask someone older as she had no rational explanation. “Just one, Professor. Why do wizards and witches insist on wearing hats that are infundibuliform?”

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Fri, 22 Sep 1995

“You’re out of detention early,” Ginny commented when Harry sat near her on the sofa by the fire. “Did you see Ron or Hermione on your way back?”

“Ah, no,” Harry said, wincing slightly. “They’re still not speaking to me, anyway, unless you count grunts from Ron and glares from Hermione.”

“Do you blame them?” Ginny’s mouth had curled into a wry smile, but it still had yet to reach her eyes.

“Nah,” Harry said, stretching his legs out. “Reckon it’s quite nice to not be subjected to twenty questions from her, or your brother’s consternation over what my intentions are.”

“Intentions? Regarding what?” Ginny was watching Harry very closely, and he knew he had just put his foot in it.

Her continuing ability to tell when he was being evasive if not outright dishonest was starting to challenge his pride. He was cautious about bringing up her methods again, as it could lead into twenty questions with Ginny that he was unprepared to handle given her apparent advantage. “Oh, the usual Weasley thing,” Harry said as mildly as he thought he could get away with. “What’s going on with my plans for world domination, your mum, that sort of thing.”

“Uh-huh.” Ginny had not quite narrowed her eyes, but he could tell she was not far from it. “This wouldn’t be related to the letter from Bill, now would it?”

“Honestly? No,” Harry said smugly. That was complete truth. Ron had played twenty questions before Bill had come along and had not tried to interfere beyond a reluctant offer of aid should it be required.

Ginny frowned sharply at his answer. “I know you’re telling me the truth, but that’s only because I asked the wrong question.”

“Yes, well, so life goes,” Harry offered, doing his best sage impersonation. “How did your meeting with Remus go?”

“Okay, I suppose. He thinks I’ve just about got the basics to Level One down, now I merely need a lot of practice.” She sighed slightly, before perking up a bit. “Oh, I almost forgot. Harry, Remus asked me to pass this to you after my Occlumency lesson earlier.” She rummaged in her pockets for a moment before she pulled out a scrap of parchment. “I’m sorry, he made no effort to hide it, and I saw what it said as soon as he handed it to me.”

Ginny held out a small scrap of parchment, which Harry took and unfurled. Harry accepted it with a nod of thanks.

22 Sep – Harry – Change in plans. FM+A relocated to GZ by ‘request’, details per usual. –RJL

“Dammit!” The short note did nothing to make him particularly happy. “Sorry, Ginny,” Harry said quickly, jumping to his feet, “change in plans. Tomorrow’s meeting is,” Harry paused to check his watch, “shit! In ten minutes! You can’t join us for this one. It’s not even an option.” Harry glanced at her briefly and saw concern all over her face. “I’ve got to run, or else I’m not going to be on time, and that would be bad. I’ll explain, err, tomorrow. Meet me for breakfast!”

Giving up any further explanation, Harry bolted up the stairs to the dormitories. He gave a brief wave to Neville, who was buried in a pile of textbooks and papers, and fairly tore through the protective wards around his trunk. Pulling out a full-body robe of perfect white, Harry dumped his bag out into the trunk without regard for any collateral damage. The robe was quickly stuffed into the bag, the trunk sealed, and then he extricated the Firebolt from under the bed and the protective measures keeping it safe. Rising in a rush, he slammed the window open, his bag over his shoulder, and jumped out the window and onto the broom.

He needed to avoid being late; things were strained enough as it was. The rituals he would have to endure on the other side were going to

cut it close. As soon as Harry crossed the castle wall and wards, he concentrated and Apparated straight to the open air above the target destination. It was risky to Apparate into the airspace directly over the field, and he was rewarded for his haste with the brazen blaring of a dragon and shouts from the ground.

Harry aimed directly for the knot of armed guards, braking as quickly as he was able, and calling out, "Friend! Friend!" as loud as he could. It would not buy him any safety, but it would give him a chance to get near enough to be inspected before he was either eaten or blown from the sky.

Landing a few yards from the mail-clad figures of two goblin squads, Harry held both empty hands to the sky and yelled again, "Friend! I have come for the meeting! My host is Da'ath Smowl Crowley!"

There was a rapid-fire exchange in Gobbledegook that he had no hope of following, given the fairly limited understanding he had of their very complicated tongue. A lead figure motioned him forward, so Harry slung his bag off his shoulder and into his right hand. With his left hand, he held out the broom. Carrying both at full extension, Harry walked forward.

Two guards levelled poleaxes slightly forward of and at either side of Harry, while one stood back with his hands raised. Harry knew the middle figure was prepared to use very powerful goblin magic against him if he tried anything. Harry offered no resistance when the bag and broom were removed, and both were searched thoroughly. The white body robe was pulled out and held aside, before the emptied bag was tossed onto the ground by the completely inspected broom. With a curt hand gesture, the lead goblin indicated for Harry to complete the inspection process.

Harry carefully held out each wand, handle first, and deposited them in the hands of a guard that appeared from behind him. Then he stripped all of his clothes off until he was in just his pants and waited for a magical scan to be used. Blinking rapidly from the bright light of the scan, Harry caught the white robe and hastily pulled it on. It was a bit chilly to be standing around outside in so little clothing this far north, no matter what time of year it might be.

“You’re late,” the lead figure grunted in heavily accented English. The guards raised the poleaxes, while another stuffed his belongings into the bag before hoisting both and carrying them off to a storage area. “Better run.”

Needing no further encouragement, Harry slipped into a provided pair of sport sandals, which automatically resized, and started running down the tunnel behind the guards. The sharp turn down into the earth after a few dozen yards was entirely expected, and he slowed just enough to navigate the turn before he jumped onto the stairs and took them as fast as he dared.

Somewhat breathless and with sweat beading his brow, Harry reached the bottom of the twisty and narrow staircase in a personal record time. Following the narrow tunnel at the base for another fast jog, he slowed as it abruptly joined a major thoroughfare, itself on a gentle slope of some five degrees or so. Turning to continue downward, Harry kept his pace to a steady if slightly fast jog, trying not to come too close to any of the goblins he saw moving about.

The moderate artery of the underground city was paved perfectly smooth, as were the walls from the floor for some five yards of height. From there, the remainder of the walls and all of the ceiling were entirely natural cavern formations, causing shadows to leap about like children’s puppets in the flickering torch light that lined the walls. At the base of the thoroughfare, where the slope disappeared, Harry continued straight ahead and ignored the other road options. Moving through a giant archway some thirty feet across and forty feet tall, Harry slowed to a brisk walk as he moved into a giant natural cavern, lit with mammoth cauldrons of oil. The light reflected from thousands of quartz crystals embedded across the stalactites.

In the middle of the cavern stood a massive ziggurat, three stories of twenty feet each building the structure. Adorning the top of the temple were columns of pure gold, atop which each held a smaller yet still massive cauldron of burning oil. The floor was perfectly paved, with not even the tiniest crack or uneven region in it.

Harry made a beeline for the junction of the base at the first story and the gentle ascent ramp. A series of stout doors, each guarded by a squad of goblins, stood closed. Harry approached the central door and bowed low. "I have come for the meeting."

Nothing was said, but then Harry did not expect any conversations with the guards. Instead, the door was drawn back, and Harry strode inside. He was relieved to find he was not late, for Remus stood with Sirius just inside the passage. Several others were milling about further inside, but Harry breathed deeply to know he was not going to create more conflict from tardiness into what was likely to be a contentious meeting.

"Remus!" Harry said happily, breathing a bit harder than normal from the pace of his arrival. He grabbed Remus in a hard hug, before releasing him and pulling Sirius close. "Sirius! Where the hell have you guys been?!"

Sirius held up both hands to cut Harry off, to which Harry glared, but Remus pulled Harry close to his side and whispered fast and low. "Harry, I need to tell you this, but I can't really explain it right now. Cyril has an agenda of his own. I don't think he's interested in working with our plans."

"What?" Of all the things Harry had thought he might hear tonight, this was far from the list. "Are you saying don't trust him?"

"Not at all," Remus hissed. "You can trust him, but be wary of his motives."

Harry had to reflect on that for a heartbeat. "So now you're saying be wary of any of the 'adults' at Hogwarts? Everyone?"

"Well," Remus temporised, "I'd trust Poppy any day of the week to take care of you – but not to keep your secrets, necessarily. Other than that, your summary is correct."

Sirius spoke up in a loud voice suddenly, as a door further down the passage opened. "C'mon, Harry, let's get inside."

Remus made a motion to ask nothing more at that moment and started following Sirius into the inner chamber. Harry hurried next to his side and gave one last whisper. "I need a box for Peeves."

Remus nodded his understanding, but then they were into the meeting hall, and no one was speaking. Harry followed the other two as they made their way to one of many triad seats along the outside of the hollow square-shaped table. Remus sank into the lead chair of three, while Sirius gracefully sat in the one to the left and just behind Remus'. Harry sat in the chair to the right, in line with Sirius. The other groups settled about the table, all except along the far side away from the doors, at which no one sat.

As the last group settled, the solid block wall behind the empty side parted in the centre, and three very tall figures emerged. Harry immediately recognised Crowley, serene as ever, and his two peers, Frimdexw and Tulmnik. Tulmnik always appeared lost in his own mind, though Harry knew he seldom missed anything spoken in his presence. Frimdexw was the problem, looking down on those not of the Elder. But today, Harry could see naked fury on his face, which was troubling.

Each moved to a solitary seat on the unoccupied side and sat, except Crowley, who stood in the centre on their side of the table. With a gesture, the wall behind him closed, and the doors by which the others had entered also firmly closed and locked. When the silence was complete, he sat and nodded exactly once. "This unscheduled meeting has been called to hear from the Lupin delegation."

Immediately, every eye turned to Remus, who rose and placed his hands flat on the table in front of him. "Our progress over the past two months has been ahead of schedule in some respects and behind schedule in others. Harry Potter has now joined Hogwarts, whilst immediately dislodging the primary makers of instability in the school. However, there was an unanticipated problem with a select group of Voldemort sympathising families, and it has retarded Mr Potter's acceptance and the image we hoped to immediately establish."



Harry practiced his own meditation exercises as Remus quickly rehashed the status of life in Hogwarts to date. As Remus baldly and rather painfully detailed the things Harry had done wrong, which were several, he also stated what Harry had achieved that they had not originally planned on doing for weeks, if not months, yet.

“In events outside of that domain, Edgar has neutralised the —“

A loud clap echoed through the room, and Frimdexw stood, his fury still evident. “There is nothing outside of that domain! I see weakness, I see failure, I see humans who are betraying our trust! Again!”

No one said anything for a moment, and Harry knew he had to keep his mouth shut. He was not allowed to speak unless invited to by an Elder. “That is not the case,” Remus replied calmly, “and you know this. True, we have had setbacks. False, we have not abused your trust.”

“Bah!” The Elder looked very close to losing control. If the body chemistry were physically capable of it, Harry would have expected him to foam at the mouth based on the tone alone. “What have you done for alliances? Weasleys are nothing! What of the ones we told you to make contact with? What of the locus? What of the denizens beyond the shadows?”

Remus remained standing straight, and Harry had to admire anew the strength of his friend. Under the verbal onslaught and the radiating power of the Elder, Harry was personally feeling very nervous about the odds of leaving the room unscathed.

“It has barely been three weeks, you cannot —“

“I cannot?!” The Elder slammed his hand on the table again, this time causing it to buckle and shatter in the space directly in front of the enraged one. “But I can! Time is everything! We gave you much, humans, and we have nothing to show for it! And we die waiting, risking! Or have you already forgotten?!”

Crowley stood, and Harry felt a glimmer of hope. Without looking at anyone, he announced, "Peace, now. They had nothing to do with your maknoy, and you are aware of this."

Frimdexw glared at Crowley, then turned and gestured to the wall, which unsealed. Without a word or look back, Frimdexw left, and the wall resealed itself. "Continue," Crowley said as he resumed his seat.

Remus, hands still on the table, did exactly that. "Edgar has neutralised the recent efforts of Minister Fudge's lead counsel by . . ." Harry listened but did not discover anything beyond what he already knew. Everything Remus detailed was something they had been working on at some level for months or was based on Umbridge's efforts. The primary differences since the last formal meeting of the allies were all about events that had taken place since the initial decision to move the war to the next stage. The more frequent and informal meetings that they tended to have spent less time rehashing and more time planning. Of course, those meetings had no Elder in them. At length, Remus concluded his summary and remained standing.

"And what new business should this body be aware of, Remus Lupin?"

For the first time that night, Harry saw Remus shift slightly. He knew that only truth could be spoken in this room, but when an open-ended question was asked, the binding magic made for interesting loopholes in what could or could not be ignored. "It has been brought to some of our attention that the Flamels potentially had more than one agenda in place. We are here for the restoration, but there may have been something related to power struggles within the ICW itself."

Harry was simply shocked into numbness. Remus would not state such here without strong belief in the matter, but the idea of Nicolas not disclosing something that could be critical was beyond the pale. Silence remained in the room, but it was obvious that everyone other than the Elder had questions.

After the silence stretched out to far beyond uncomfortable, Tulmnik leaned forward slightly. "Would this matter be of the War Mage leadership?"

"Possibly," Remus admitted. "It is of the War Mages in some manner, though we have no way at present to discover what, how, or why."

Crowley nodded at this statement, and Harry was surprised when the Elder locked gazes with him. "This matter is one we know of. There is no conflict."

Remus nodded, while Harry wondered at what Crowley was trying convey through eyes alone. "Thank you," Remus' voice called out. "We have nothing further to discuss at this time."

"Very well," Crowley said, standing. "We will continue this at the next regularly scheduled meeting. Harry Potter, you will remain."

Harry stayed in his seat as everyone else in the room, including Tulmnik, left the way they had come. Sirius and Remus patted Harry on the shoulders as they passed him, Remus whispering, "Soon, Harry," as he left.

When the room was empty, Crowley beckoned Harry to follow him. They moved into the passage that led deeper into the ziggurat, following the path taken by Tulmnik. Almost instantly, they came to a junction, upon which Crowley guided Harry away from the centre of the building. Harry said nothing, for he knew that Crowley would speak when he was ready to, regardless of how much Harry wanted to ask dozens of questions immediately. Their circuitous path kept them to the outer-most corridors whenever a junction was encountered, but this was a path Harry had been on before.

At length, they exited the back of the building and walked through the giant natural cavern, arriving at a smaller opening into a series of unpaved passages. Crowley picked out a winding and twisting path up, and Harry followed. They at last reached a moderate, open

alcove with a natural formation that opened to the night sky, creating a small window.

“As you know, any of the Elder may call such a meeting. It should be obvious who called this, and why.” Crowley remained unflappable, and Harry understood that this was all of any apology that would ever come for this night.

“I understand,” he replied quietly. “I did not quite follow the maknoy problem.”

Crowley moved over to the window and looked out of it before responding. “There is no problem. She is dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry automatically replied.

Crowley raised one hand in a simple gesture telling Harry that no more need be said. “When you are Elder, this is to be expected. What is problematic is that the maknoy was also Elder. We are Elder, we are not Infinite.”

Harry said nothing, for there was nothing he could say. The exact numbers of the Elder were a great mystery, one that he had once naïvely asked about. Had he been older, he suspected he would have been given a sound thrashing for asking a question that was not allowed. As it was, he was merely given short treatment for several weeks, but not by Crowley. Crowley had complimented him, in private, about asking the question that everyone wanted to ask, but no one dared to.

“You had things you wished to speak of but could not. What would you ask, young Harry?”

Harry blinked, trying to think of what was most important to ask in the time he had been offered. “Riddle. What is he up to, and what should we be doing?”

“Plans,” Crowley murmured, “he makes his plans and adjusts for your plans. The game is no longer limited, for he now can act on his

own.” Crowley hummed softly for a moment before he turned to face Harry again. “We believe he has something in place outside of what he has done in the past. He has a source of information we have not been able to find.”

“So he’s pushing our buttons?”

“Crude, but perhaps accurate,” Crowley acknowledged. “He is likely taking the measure of his opponents.”

“Lovely,” Harry muttered. “How much of a problem is Frimdexw going to be? Or the other Elder?”

Crowley said nothing for a time in response, instead gazing at an unknown visage from the opening to the night sky. “You should understand, Harry, that few people appreciate being reminded of their mortality. On the one hand, it is just the loss of a minor wife, a blow to pride and ego. On the other hand, it is the loss of life itself, a reminder that we are all but temporary residents here.”

Harry nodded absently, envisioning Ginny’s dejected countenance. “I have to keep reminding myself that not everyone has accepted their death as inevitable.”

“Few ever have a path to walk as yours. Such events to transpire in so little time. Do not forget that it is also a journey.”

Harry said nothing in response, for there was nothing he could say that would have any value. To the life of Crowley and his peers, he supposed that the mundane goblins or humans came and went with alarming rapidity, an impermanence of thought through continuous disruption from pesky mortality. Yet even so, Crowley’s days were numbered just as surely as Harry’s were, and the mere fact of their common mortality coupled to their understanding of such was enough to make them kindred souls of the mutual journey. It was their views on life – on the purpose and issues in life – that made them companions in brotherhood rather than simply travellers upon the same road.

Any further conversation would be impossible, Harry knew, as soon as the steady tramping of feet making a distant bass heartbeat became audible. The rumble and faint vibration increased as they stood side by side, staring into the night. Within moments, the higher pitched jingle of mail and metal made a discordant cacophony counterpoint to the deep cadence of marching feet, and in some sense, marching life. It had only been a few moments, but the tramp of feet and jingle of metal became quite loud, and Harry turned to see a nine-squad of goblin warriors come into the alcove proper.

The glittering eyes in helms of steel enamelled to the colour of blackest night took in everything, which was apparent. No weapons were drawn, and Harry knew he had been regarded and promptly discarded as a threat with the casual ease of long assessment. As a unit, the entire squad came to a halt, all sounds ceasing except for the very faint breeze of soft breathing and disturbed spaces. The leading eight members, two columns of four, dropped instantly to one knee, heads bowed, left hands in clenched fists to their foreheads. The squad leader, standing in back, bowed from the neck, but kept his eyes firmly where he could observe the room while showing all respect. A brief comment was made in a dialect of Gobbledegook that Harry vaguely recognised as the high-priest form, at which point Crowley turned and surveyed the newcomers.

Harry knew their time was over, and proper deference was due to the situation. Turning to face Crowley, he dropped to one knee in supplication, both cupped hands held up as though to catch rain from the sky. With his eyes down, Harry said the necessary ritualistic phrase to allow his passage out of the caverns. "I thank you for the gift of time you have granted me, Elder. You honour me with such treasure."

Without waiting for a response, Harry fluidly rose and left the room, threading his way back to the surface, and ultimately back to Hogwarts. Time was of the essence, as it always would be.

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A/N:

About the long delay before this chapter was posted. As I stated in other forums, and in A/N's on other works of mine, Echoes is a very complex story that takes a non-trivial amount of time to work on. In the beginning, I had a good bit of idle time and could post weekly or even twice a week. However, as an adult with kids and a real job with high demands, my free time is something that comes and goes in cycles. The past year or so has seen it at a very, very low level. I will publish when and as I can, but I will not sacrifice the quality to just rush material out. As I have said many times, I will not abandon this story barring something truly horrific happening. In the event that I am forced to do so, which I cannot foresee at all, then rest assured that I will simply post my detailed outline of exactly what happens, why, and when. One way or the other, you will not be left hanging. The outline itself is in excess of 75k words.

A big thank-you to the beta team: cwarbeck and Chreechree for their dedicated editing, plot checking, and consistency legwork; Sherylyn, for conversion and slang corrections; and Sovran for the pre-publication sanity check.

Notes on specific parts of this chapter:

Material on King Alfred sources from English Historical Documents, vol. 1, by Dorothy Whitelock. This edition comes via Readings In Medieval History, Volume One: The Early Middle Ages, edited by Patrick J. Geary (2nd edition).

Harry cited H. P. Lovecraft, specifically, "The Tomb." You can find it in the anthology Dagon and Other Macabre Tales (selected by Derleth, edited by Joshi).

The paraphrasing of the work of Sun-tzu is based on The Art of War by Sun-tzu, translated by Ralph D. Sawyer. The passage in question is from Part 3, "Planning Offensives." I will also refer on occasion to Military Methods of the Art of War, by Sun Pin, also translated by Ralph D. Sawyer.

Some people may think of the mentioned 'St. Mungo's Mobile Emergency' as derived from St Margaret's New Zealand Chronicles. I had this version planned out long before I read her story, but I wanted

to acknowledge that in the actual writing around this plot device I may be slightly influenced by her work. I have substantially different logistics and mechanics involved, but I feel that the credit is due since she did publish a version of the concept first. You will be finding out more about this as the story continues.

The phrase Harry uses to Ginny (“¡Ándale! ¡Ándale! ¡Arriba! ¡Arriba!”) is borrowed from Speedy Gonzalez, the fastest mouse in all of Mexico. Its rough translation would be “Come on, hurry up!” or something along those lines.

A few wrapping-up notes from prior chapters:

I promised more details on the Uncommon Law case cited. The short version is that the UL cases are all fictitious. That said, a barrister in England wrote the cases, mostly to poke fun at the illogical situations that could conceivably arise through the complex layers of common law. The “cases” for UL were published as serials in England, typically in Punch, and widely read by both non-lawyers and lawyers. To the author’s credit, there were several instances of laws changing to redress the issues brought up by the fictitious UL cases – in effect, proving that truth is stranger than fiction. Or something along those lines, at any rate.

I used the words cromulent and embiggened in a prior chapter. For those not in the know, these are fake words created in an episode of The Simpsons to poke fun at certain ideas. The reason I used these is that I have received several reviews questioning whether I understand my audience, generally with implications that the vocabulary or concept behind this story – especially in the Theory of Magic sections – is too complex. Of course, there have been quite a few to stand in a glass house and throw stones for my being involved with fanfic at all. All I can suggest is this: writing these little ditties is my stress outlet from an otherwise much more complicated life. Some people watch TV. Some people read books. Some people write them. If you don’t like it, don’t read it. And if you have to pick up the dictionary once every now and then, be glad you’re learning something, rather than losing more brainpower through mindless visual conditioning.



. . . the common misconception indicating that such mental disciplines yield dramatic advantages to the practitioner. Examples of such rumoured benefits include total memory recall, accelerated learning, advanced comprehension of material, and/or pensieve-like capacity to observe the unobserved. While this belief has a certain widespread acceptance as truth, it is on par with other cultural legends. The reality is that Occlumency provides a means of protection, through a deep ability to focus, and nothing more. Legilimency, also victim to misconceptions, allows for the discernment of select mental states but does not present a target's mind as an archive for casual perusal.

Classically, the student of Occlumency would learn of two 'types' of defence: a passive defence through focus on a select static memory, and an active defence of shifting memories with counter-thrusts of Legilimency. In the former case, the ability to protect one's mind is in direct proportion to the experience, ability to focus, and willpower of each participant. Those who are frequent users of these skills and who possess a very strongly focused will can easily succeed against opponents who lack such traits. In the classic active defence model, the paired Legilimency probing that accompanies a strong defence will drain the focus and will of an unprepared opponent.

Detailed investigation has revealed that through methodical exercises, Occlumens can utilise at least seven different levels of defence. The boundaries between these levels are identified by the sophistication of the defence, currently known as: (i) active shields; (ii) passive shields; (iii) active defences; (iv) deflection; (v) transparency; (vi) shadowed mind; and (vii) illusions. While it remains in the realm of possibility that further levels may be attainable, to date only one human has reached a recorded level beyond five, and that skill required over two centuries of effort. The typical lifespan of magical humans implies that levels beyond seven may never be realised. The capacities of other magical races for the skills of Occlumency and Legilimency remain unknown.

### Level One Occlumency

Active shielding, the simplest defence, relies on the practitioner actively focusing on one specific thought to form a barrier to intruders. To the novice, the recognition of an invasion represents the bulk of

the learning curve required for this method to work. External mental probes by nature begin on the outer fringe of consciousness and drive inward. In the process of crossing the remote edges of consciousness, the subject experiencing the invasion must realise that perturbed thoughts, which appear to be random distractions, are in actuality caused by outside forces. Once this pattern can be recognised, bending all concentration possible onto only a specific thought or memory attains a rudimentary mental defence. This limiting of all voluntary thoughts to a specific pattern forces intruders to either dwell in the chosen memory until they withdraw or else push against the artificial pattern in sufficient strength to break the concentration of the target.

When the dynamic push-pull system is confronted with . . .

. . . Excerpt from Theory of Magic, Volume IV: Skills, Gifts, and Legacies, Section I: Mind Arts, edited by R.J.L.

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19 Aug 1992

With a sigh, Harry sat back and closed the thick tome that Nicolas had tracked down. His teacher had been distraught to see the books slip away before he could take possession last winter, and that had been before everything else that unfolded so quickly. When word came in three days ago that the books had been located, Nicolas had departed without a word and returned late the next night. No-one spoke of how they were obtained, but the grim look in his teacher's eyes told him it was best not to ask questions.

"What have you learned, Harry?" Nicolas' voice was the standard, patient tone he had come to appreciate, though the man's eyes were as flat as they had been for over eight months now.

"Well," Harry replied slowly, pretending to be thinking about the volume they had been poring over for the past day. In reality, he was trying very hard not to throw up the bile and acid in his empty stomach. The mere thought of lunch had almost done him in, and he

had only read the passage on the first ritual at that point. Now he wished he had fallen ill in order to avoid reading the second. “It sounds like he really only has two options to come back: the Golem Ritual or the Rite of Rebirth. The problem is that the Golem Ritual is flawed and not a real solution.”

“Remus?” Nicolas directed his gaze onto Harry’s best friend. “Would you agree with this?”

“I think Harry is right in the basics,” Remus said after a long hesitation. “I don’t think he understands it fully, however. Both of these rites are actually ritualistic frameworks employing other magics that are already well understood. It is the combination of old and new that makes them so powerful, and the rituals themselves that make the material so Dark. As I see it, neither is really set in stone – either could be adapted to fit other purposes with some effort. Thus, I think there may be other options but would not wish to guess as to what they may . . . entail.”

Nicolas nodded as Remus spoke, which led Harry to believe that Remus was correct but not as correct as he could be. “Indeed,” Nicolas confirmed, “nothing with magic is truly set in stone, as it were. Consider the Golem Ritual and what would happen if we substituted the Elixir of Life for unicorn blood.”

Harry was unsure what might occur, as the mechanics of the potion bases in both rites were far beyond his level of understanding. Remus seemed to have the same insight as Nicolas, however, as Harry saw his friend pale considerably. “The golems would not wear out. He would have the perfect host.”

“Exactly, Remus!” Nicolas said. “And consider this – his essence would not be bound as it would in the Rite of Rebirth. He could flit from golem to golem and none would be the wiser.”

Nicolas looked expectantly at both Harry and Remus for a long moment, which led Harry to wonder what they were missing. The Golem Ritual, carried out in either fashion, still required a massive investment of time and resources to make it work. Moreover, the

sheer manpower necessary to support the ritual would make it very challenging. But there was something about Nicolas' gaze that made him think they were overlooking something important.

Remus coughed suddenly, and Harry turned to him with concern. "Your vault," Remus said after thumping his own chest with a fist a few times. "Someone made a grab on the vault you kept the Philosopher's Stone in last year."

"Correct. Had I not removed it some time before then, it would now be powering Voldemort's unstoppable golem dynasty." Nicolas turned slightly to look at Harry rather than Remus. "What do we know now, Harry?"

Harry had to pause to re-evaluate both rites, combined with the indicators they had just discussed. "It would seem he's still stuck in essence form. He must do one of these rituals, or something like them, in order to regain his body. Denied the Stone, the golems would each fall apart rapidly if he used much magic directly. That would limit his power and be a constant weakness. But the Rite of Rebirth isn't any better, really, as he would be reborn as a child. He would spend a decade and more rebuilding his body, yet he would be vulnerable the whole time. Who would he trust to see to his needs? I doubt there's anyone he can trust, let alone would trust."

Nicolas sat down slowly and nodded once sharply. "Very good, Harry. You have grasped the stalemate we are in. I suspect this is why he did not come back until he could make a grab for the Stone. He does not wish to do either of these rites, for they each carry a set of problems he must overcome. He will continue to look for a way to enhance either, or to find a third option, such that he is not weak when he returns. But I do not think he will continue to wait much longer. If something is not found that will suit his needs, I fear he will proceed with either of these as they are and, if necessary, look for a better solution later. He cannot afford to let you fully mature while he is so weakened."

Remus shuddered briefly. "I can't fathom the amount of time he must have spent researching these, or how he found out where the Stone was kept."

“That worries me as well,” Nicolas said softly. “Harry, which rite do you think is more likely for him to pursue?”

Harry shrugged briefly. “I can’t see him accepting a body that falls apart with normal magic use. His inner circle was supposed to be fanatically loyal to him, and they’d know they couldn’t really kill him since he survived before. I’d bet on the Rebirth. He wouldn’t have to be seen physically to still wield power.”

“Good,” Nicolas said after a moment, “but that opinion shows your non-magical upbringing. You cannot kidnap children of wizards and witches, Harry. There is too much that will be left behind that can be used to directly track and locate the child. I have never heard of a successful abduction of any child of at least one magical parent when the parent was trained.”

Harry had to think about the implications of that for a bit, staring at the ceiling absently. “You’re saying he wouldn’t be able to find a host for the ritual?”

“Not without killing every relation that exists in the entire bloodline, no.”

“And are we sure that a non-magical host would not suffice?”

“Technically, it wouldn’t really matter,” Remus said slowly. “You can run tests to determine whether the Rebirth will be correct or not. But for Voldemort, who has always wanted to be pureblood, it would matter. If he were recreating himself, he would want a pureblood host to be the basis.”

“So we should keep a close eye on the untimely deaths of purebloods?” Harry asked into the silence.

“As well as a close eye on the value of boomslang skin,” Remus said after a long period of silence. “If someone wanted to do the Golem Ritual, the large volume of the purchase should spike the market price heavily.”

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Sat, 23 Sep 1995

“I’ve got one! Scaly squirrel scrotum.”

“Oooo, nice one, George,” Fred commented. “Harry?”

Harry made a seesawing motion with one hand. “I’ll concede the scrotum choice, but scaly? Is that really the best adjective you can come up with to make something viscerally disturbing?”

George smiled briefly. “Well, I thought about saying sleek, for the Sleekeazy hair product, but it just didn’t work by itself. Sleek Squirrel Scrotum, it sounds like it should be employed in a red-light district.”

“What about sautéed?” Harry asked.

“Eugh!” Fred shuddered. “That’s just sick, Harry.”

George clapped his hands together. “Very nice. Perhaps simply ‘saggy’ would do?”

“Saggy squirrel scrotum?” Harry asked. “What’s so disturbing about that?”

“Sallow!” Fred offered. “Colours work, eh?”

This time George shook his head. “Nah, I think sautéed was better.”

“Scurvy?” Harry asked after a moment. “Nah, that’s a noun.”

“You can make it an adjective, though – scurviest,” Fred suggested. “Kind of disturbing, bleeding squirrel scrotums. Wonder if Vitamin C would help that.”

“Sloppy? Sloppy squirrel scrotum?” George sounded slightly hopeful that this suggestion would be better received.

Ginny's voice cut through the discussion. "Do I want to know why you three are pondering squirrel scrotums?"

"Ginny!" Fred said with overtones of pleasure, standing up to turn and face her. "Join us whilst we wait for the others!"

Harry could see that she was less than convinced that she would want to join them for any reason at all, let alone the topic of conversation. "It's a game, you might say," he pointed out as she sat on the sofa with Fred. "Some friends of mine played it when they were students here years ago. They still do, actually."

"That doesn't make me feel any better," Ginny responded with a half-smile. "If it's who I'm thinking of, this has to be sick and twisted somehow."

George looked back and forth between Ginny and Harry for a moment, the expression on his face clearly depicting a strong curiosity. Before he could say anything, however, Harry continued. "The game is played in turns. Each player has two patterns to choose from. The first pattern is that you pick a letter, such as 'S', and then you need an adjective, a living entity, and something sexual – all starting with that letter, and in that order. The idea is to make something very graphic and as disturbing as possible. Thus, George has proposed a saggy squirrel scrotum."

"Proposed? Mum will be over the moon to plan a wedding for George and his scrotum chum." Ginny's half-smile remained in place, though her left eyebrow had climbed a bit at the explanation. "Let's see . . . saggy, and I heard sautéed. Why not sugary, for that matter?"

"See?" Fred stage whispered. "I told you she'd do well."

"Yeah, yeah," Harry agreed with a wave. "The other option is rhyming. It's the same adjective-animal-sexual pattern, but now all three words have to rhyme, not necessarily start with the same letter. It's a lot harder to rhyme than it is to do matching letters, so . . ."

Ginny paused for a moment, watching the three of them sitting around in various laid-back poses. “Such as queer deer spear?”

Harry blinked at her comment and then started laughing softly. “You’ve played this before.”

Ginny’s smile became full-blown, and for once in the past week, it seemed to be completely genuine. “Maybe,” she admitted. “Maybe I’ve only heard about it.”

“Oh?” George asked, leaning forward. “What’s the best line you’ve heard? Harry has refused to tell us any.”

“Really?” Ginny asked, her surprise clear. “Well, the one I found the most . . . poignant . . . was tangy orangutan puntang.”

Harry laughed hard at the expressions that slowly crossed the twin’s faces. There was a clear set of stages – shock, contemplation, then disgust. “That really is disturbing,” George finally offered. “Who came up with that one?”

Ginny held Harry’s gaze for a moment. “Don’t know,” she admitted. “I was ignored when I asked.”

“That’s truly repellent,” Fred murmured a bit too loudly. “Who would risk the tasting to find that out?”

George firmly smacked Fred on the shoulder, all but growling, “Don’t think about it! Don’t ask! Gaahhh!” George then got up and ran up the stairs, hands over his ears, while Fred snickered.

“Very nice,” Harry suggested. “George ran out, so you won the bet. He owes you a Galleon.”

Fred stood up and tossed a small bundle to Harry before following after his brother, sweetly calling out, “Oh, Geoooooorge,” on the way.

After the departure of the twins, Harry looked at Ginny and tried to assess her mental state. The faint smile remaining on her face now



appeared fragile, but her eyes had a bit of flash to them. "So how did you get Remus talking about this?" he finally asked.

Ginny's smile became somewhat more tangible as she met his gaze. "I sort of stumbled in while he was arguing with someone about the merits of, and I quote, a prancing Queer Deer Spear. There was quite a bit of laughter about whether 'prongs would know', or something like that. The other person kept telling him it wasn't up to the snuffles test and threw the 'tangy' line out."

"You saw Sirius?"

"Is that who it was? No, Remus was talking to thin air as far as I could tell." Ginny nodded vaguely at the bundle he had received from Fred. "What's that?"

"The latest version of their extruding ear, or whatever they're calling it."

"Extendible, I think," she murmured. "What are you using it for?"

"I thought I'd listen in on your little chat with the Art professor. You remember what we talked about, yes?"

Ginny nodded slightly, her smile dead and buried. "Yes, Harry, I did promise. I just don't want to get any more detentions from her, all right?"

"Fair enough. How are you feeling?"

Ginny broke eye contact and looked across the room. After a pause, she said, "I'm coping. As you said, I'm not dead yet."

"Well . . ." Harry slowly stretched the word out, "I had been leading up to the idea of food, but that's nice to know, too. Hungry?"

Her look told him his effort at subterfuge was a complete failure. "All right, then," she said quietly. "Is Ron talking to you yet?"

“Nah,” Harry said with a shrug. “He was sort of staring at the ceiling and twitching a bit when I left. Wasn’t sure whether I should risk Hermione’s wrath by telling her the kid’s still not sleeping.”

Ginny shook her head slowly. “You probably want to continue to avoid her. I guess he’ll be getting more Calming Draught today. Maybe I’ll take Hermione when I go to Poppy and talk with them about, err, your help for Ron.”

“I didn’t mean to break him,” Harry reminded her. “I thought it’d help.”

“Harry,” Ginny said with a tone that made it clear she was completely unsurprised, “your idea of ‘help’ isn’t what most people think of when they ask for it. You tend to be, well, either brutally direct or else indifferent.”

“Oh.” Harry was unsure what he could say or do in response to that, so he simply tried to accept the statement as her view of reality. To some extent, what she said mirrored the impression he had been receiving lately from others – although they were far more circumspect about it. Playing ‘nice-nice’ was in large part based on being nice, which suggested taking into consideration the feelings of others on all levels. At the same time, people ready to believe rumours or slander were probably not worth the effort of being nice to. The road to hell was paved with good intentions, but it was the repercussions that really caught up to any action in such a profound way.

Resigned to a situation that was unlikely to resolve favourably anytime soon, Harry rose, and together they began the trek toward the Great Hall for an early breakfast. Ginny reverted to her recently ‘normal’ subdued self once they were in the corridor, so Harry opted to fill her in on the events of the prior evening. “Sorry for running out so quickly last night,” he offered quietly. He had no trust in the secrecy of what they might talk about while in public, so he deliberately kept things vague for the moment. “I’ll give you exacts later, but some of our . . . partners in this mess called for an unscheduled meeting.”

Rounding the end of the corridor and waiting for the first staircase sequence to align, Harry glanced around. He could see a few heads moving about several floors below, but with the time as early as it was, he thought it reasonable to guess that no more people were about. The few portraits that were not feigning sleep kept their eyes following them as they moved onto the staircase.

When they arrived on the fifth floor and began the detour to reach a different set of staircases, Harry continued. "The meetings like last night are very, err, formal and not really helpful to meaningful discussions. There's still a meeting on tonight, or there should be. What that means is that I'll still talk to Dumbledore about taking you with me tonight – if you want to go."

Ginny said nothing as they waited for the final staircase that would take them down to the Entrance Hall and the Great Hall. "Do you think I should?" she finally asked.

Harry shrugged a bit. "Hard to say, really. You've met Remus and Tonks, so you'll sort of know a few people. A few others know of you, but I would imagine most wouldn't care much as long as you're vouched for and under fealty oath to one of us. It's more of a chance for you to understand that, well, we're not alone in this mess. You're not alone."

"You think Dumbledore would let me go?"

Harry sighed, unsure how to answer her. On the one hand, the man knew of the growing predicament that Ginny was faced with. Seeing a group of faces fighting the same fight, in some form or another, would be emotionally stabilising to some degree. On the other hand, the headmaster had been absent from view for some time now, and Harry had begun to suspect that the root issue was avoidance rather than something else. Even that was hard to accept, however, as they were under fairly restrictive bonds that they simply had to communicate about old Tommy whenever possible. Even if Dumbledore was avoiding him for non-Riddle-related problems, Harry still needed to learn advanced magic from the most educated man in the United Kingdom, not waste time in classes or polishing windows.

“I’d like to say yes,” Harry ventured as they entered the Great Hall, “but I really don’t know. All I can do is ask, if you want me to. Worst case is he says no. Or maybe he says yes, but no one’s around. It’s been like that for a bit, actually.”

They sat at the end of the Gryffindor table closest to the Head table. Harry picked that location since it was about the only place he had not been recently. He knew his constant shifting around among the Gryffindors was causing some discord during meals, occasionally separating people that did not want to be. As far as he was concerned, however, the fact that he had not eaten more than one meal near the same group of people in any few days was worth a touch of ire. Only Ginny remained an obvious target, though the Weasley twins were making a solid show of painting themselves as candidates.

“All right, then,” Ginny said as she put some toast and eggs on her plate. “If he says yes, I’ll go.”

Harry nodded his acceptance of her decision and resolved to find Dumbledore after he finished listening in on Umbridge’s interrogation techniques. He wanted to know how much potential damage she could inflict based on any material she extracted from her targets. While he felt reasonably certain that Ginny and the twins would be stellar examples of stonewalling, he was less than sure that either Ron or Hermione would hold back speculation, observations, or inside comments he had imparted during a memorable “Potions Tutorial” that was more Pensieve-browsing than anything.

Ginny seemed disinclined to discuss anything further, so their breakfast passed in companionable silence. Harry kept an eye out for the people coming into the room for breakfast, continuing to build his mental map of faces to recognise and with likely groups to which those faces occurred. The open space around where Harry sat was becoming more common, as though none wanted to risk whatever was coming next.

The Slytherins that met his gaze had more or less adopted a uniformly pitying look, and he was at a loss to explain why it bothered him. Scant days after Trelawney had taken over the supervision of that House, he had begun hearing strange stories about 'reformed' views. The bulk of tales came from the younger years, but even the most senior students seemed to be milder versions of their past lives from what he could gather. The ones that continued to avoid his gaze were another story entirely, though he had no direct evidence of their support or opposition to his presence, let alone his goals.

Ginny had stopped hounding him about the loss of the original Marauder's Map, which was an unexpected development. He had requested a replacement copy for her, but with everything else going on, it had likely fallen by the wayside. The removal of the core elements that were instigators in most of the known problem situations should have truncated her particular sources of issues in the castle. While Harry remained convinced that the Malfoys were at the heart of her troubles, Ginny's continued disquiet after the boy's dismissal showed that there were lingering facets of concern. That these elements persisted in some form, even with the removal of Slytherin House's worst cell of trouble after the messy battle outside the headmaster's office, was its own source of worry for him.

In all, Harry continued to believe that anything which was counter to the Malfoy family interests was directly in his own interests, if he could only figure out why. Faced with the problem of thinking like his opponent, he had given up months ago and simply moved on to thwarting their efforts at every opportunity and worrying about the wherefore of it all later in the calm moments when there was time to speculate over plots and desires – or waiting for Remus to explain it. There was no real reason he could think of for their entanglement with the Weasleys, whatever it was, but the fact that it existed was enough for him to want to use it or break it.

"Mr Potter," a harsh voice grated next to him. "I see that you have finished your breakfast."

Turning in place, Harry calmly regarded the foul woman an arm's length away who had so blatantly interrupted his thoughts. "Indeed,

Madam Dark Arts, I have.” Her flash of annoyance at his continued false air of respect was a hollow victory for him, and they both knew it.

“Then you are to report to Mrs Figg for your detention immediately,” she snapped at him. “Miss Weasley, we may as well start your discussion with me. Come along.” The woman in her outrageous purple and pink attire waddled off, leaving Harry and Ginny to trade looks and follow her out of the Great Hall.

“Remember,” Harry whispered as quietly as he could, “no food, no drinks, no speculation.”

Ginny nodded briefly as she passed Mrs Figg, who was standing in the Entrance Hall looking rather flustered. Harry had hoped he could listen in on Umbridge’s inquisition of each person via the twin’s invention. Since he now had no opportunity to conveniently disappear before running into Mrs Figg, that was no longer an option. With a sigh, Harry realised he might as well get the situation over with, though it meant he would have to interrogate Ginny later.

“Good morning, Mrs Figg,” Harry said as he came to stand near her. There was no reason to take his frustrations out on her, after all. She had been kind to him, the pretext for their daily meetings aside. “How are you?”

Her gaze was focused on Umbridge’s disappearing back, and Harry could faintly make out the flush of Arabella’s cheeks. “That . . . that . . . that woman!” she finally ground out. “She is terribly unpleasant.”

“Dare I ask?” Harry found Arabella quite nice, if a bit dotty. She was completely harmless as far as he could tell, though her cats were another story. They had the castle covered, and he could seldom walk from one place to another without crossing paths with at least one. Filch’s cat, left behind during his unintended sojourn to St Mungo’s, usually appeared to be quite traumatised by the interlopers.

“Well,” she said as she turned to face him, “she wanted me to make you clean out the pet waste rooms without magic.”

Harry was puzzled at the term, for he had never heard it before. “Er, pet waste rooms?”

“Exactly,” she said with a grimace. “As if the house-elves don’t clean it out hourly with magic.”

“Sorry,” Harry said after further consideration. “What is the thing?”

“Don’t you have a pet?” she asked, her surprise evident.

“Not here.”

“Oh.” She paused for a moment as though trying to puzzle out part of a bigger picture. “Well, every pet has to have the Castle Charms cast on it – the elves are required to do it to every pet brought here. One part of those charms causes them to all go to the nearest pet waste room for bodily functions if they’re in the castle itself. Keeps it from being all over the place, you know.”

Harry admitted to himself that while obvious in hindsight, it was a type of trivia that he could never imagine being useful. Unless he should find himself buying a castle some day, though given the state of his finances that was unlikely at best. That issue aside, he could see both sides of the original issue – Umbridge looking for her own little score in their petty contest, and Figg finding the idea unpleasant and repulsive.

“Well,” he said with a smile, “I’m glad it sounds like you’re not going to ask me to do that.”

Mrs Figg huffed slightly before shaking her head. “Not at all.” With a small gesture, she headed outside, and Harry followed along as requested. When they were standing on the path in front of the doors, she looked about for a moment before talking again in a much quieter tone. “I probably shouldn’t say this, Harry, but I can understand your dislike of that woman. You shouldn’t have Stunned her, but she probably deserved it as far as I’m concerned.” Straightening back up, she returned to her normal volume. “This morning you’ll be helping

Hagrid, Mr Potter. You're done when he's run out of things for you to do, or when lunch is served, whichever comes first. Good day."

Somewhat amused with the outcome of the conversation, Harry spotted one of her cats staring out at him as she returned inside. With a flick and swish of its tail, the cat turned and followed Mrs Figg. Shaking his head slightly at the woman and her cats, Harry walked to Hagrid's cabin.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, Hagrid was not yet back from breakfast, and the cabin was empty – aside from an exuberant Fang, who was whining because Harry refused to let the dog lick his face more than once per visit. In order to avoid the dog's attentions, Harry walked about outside the cabin, pausing when he saw that one of the relatively tiny - and normally empty - tightly-fenced pens contained several small creatures which were rooting around in it. Until one of the small, black, furry creatures dug up a shiny bit of quartz, Harry was unsure what he was observing. At that point, the book Ginny had been forcing him to read leapt to mind, and he recognised the Nifflers for what they were. A quick count showed thirteen in the pen, so Harry surmised that Hagrid was planning a lesson on them.

Leaning against the pen railing, Harry tried not to think about what Umbridge might be doing that morning. Hopefully, Hagrid would come along soon and keep him occupied with something.

"A fairly boring morning so far," Floppy said, once more in Remus' voice. "You're not planning anything to liven things up, are you?"

The Hat was currently lazing about in the form of a multi-coloured muffetee around his left wrist, the different colours of the Hogwarts Houses repeating in a sinuous wave over the black background. In all, Harry found this particular shape highly annoying as it made his hand feel far too warm.

"Come off it, Floppy. I don't seek out opportunities."

"I wouldn't choose the word 'seek' with you."



Harry laughed softly. "All right, that's fair. Got any stories to pass the time? We left off with Ogden's Folly, as I recall."

"I think not. I would rather ask you a question instead."

"What's that, Floppy?" The hat had taken to asking him questions off and on, but its purpose was usually to elaborate on why Harry had done some specific act in the past or why someone else around him had done something. Harry supposed there were limits to what sifting through memories could tell the Hat, but that should have been somewhat expected if he had really considered the situation. Ever since Floppy had stopped its chastisement and switched to banter, Harry had found himself enjoying the company of the thing. Or rather, he enjoyed the company until it resumed mocking him.

"What would you say to Mr Riddle's question of justice?"

Harry sighed briefly. "Regarding the Dursleys? I don't really know."

"Do you think you're capable of evaluating justice?"

"In general? With enough information about an issue, sure. For them? That's tricky." Harry paused to think of how he could articulate the problem, or rather his understanding of the situation. "I can't really rely on my own memories. My perception of them changes with time, I guess, and everyone tends toward revisionism."

"Even though you still wake up haunted sometimes?"

"Well, I guess the problem is recognising what did happen versus what my mind thinks happened. I wasn't very old, you know that, and I'm not keen on reviewing it through a Pensieve. I think you need a third party to judge their acts, Floppy. I'm too biased. It's not like what they did was the only source of hell for me."

"No, I would never suggest it was. But the question remains: do you consider justice to have been served? Did they pay sufficiently for their crimes?"

Harry leaned back against the split rail paddock after checking to be sure nothing was inside. With Hagrid, you could never trust a seemingly innocent and safe location to actually be such. "I suppose I'd say that I hope so. I think a part of me wants them to suffer more, but another part just wants them gone. Not as though they left the country, but as if they never existed."

"In other words, you don't want to think about them."

"Yeah, maybe," Harry conceded after a while of thinking about whether he wanted to not think about it. "Maybe that's just me still wishing they never did exist, so it never would have happened."

"You understand the fallacy of the logic, do you not?"

"Of course. But that doesn't mean it's not how I feel. Humans aren't logical, are they?"

"No, Harry, humans are most certainly not logical. No matter how much they may try to pretend otherwise."

"We can't all be smart-arse hats now, can we?" Harry was unable to stop the jab before it came out. "Er, sorry, that was uncalled for."

"Accepted, Harry. But if you can accept that history is fact, not fiction, no matter how it may be recalled or told, and that human society has deemed their punishment meted out appropriately . . . the question is still whether or not you agree with the end result."

"Well," Harry temporized for time and space, "if I don't think much about it, then no, not really. All I can think of is the life I lived, how I felt, and how much . . . they did. But if I try to think of what their lives have been like, life in prison, and away from their son . . . well, they've sort of had their own kind of hell. Then I'd tend to say . . . probably, yes. But I can't quite . . . let go of it that easily." Harry paused to pick a particularly long blade of grass from the ground. He had previously found that he was able to discuss topics like these much better if he had something he could physically do with his hands, such as shred grass or paper into minute particles. "It's . . . I

can't . . . I can't think of them, yet not think of our mutual history. Which is why I don't think I'm right to judge them. I'd like to accept that they have paid their dues, but I don't know that I can honestly say that I do accept it."

"The difference between admiring those who have faith in something and actually having faith in something."

"Exactly. I'd like to have faith that the lesson has been taught and the balance sheets are clean. But I don't have that faith myself."

"Harry, why is it said that to forgive is divine?"

"Probably because it's hard."

"I would say that's a true answer but far from complete. Think of it this way. You have three choices. You could continue to be resentful and angry. You could simply accept that things have changed and do your best to continue not thinking about them. Or you could accept that things did change and see them as new people, different from the ones who did what they did."

"All right, but there's no certainty that they won't do something like it again to someone else."

"Of course not. But should you punish them for that which they have not yet done? Particularly that which they are unlikely to do again?"

"Err . . . not yet done? Or do again?" Harry tried to follow the implications and line of questioning for what Floppy was truly driving at. "Okay, I can see that – they haven't done anything wrong that we know of since their release. It's unlikely to be an issue as their son is grown, and they are extremely unlikely to have more kids. But you're asking about trust more than forgiveness."

"Am I? If you accept and avoid, then you are saying that you really haven't forgiven them anything. It says that you continue to carry the pain and anger with you for past wrongs, and from that pain, you avoid them. You are essentially throwing a blanket over them and

pretending not to see them. Or you could accept that they are new people, people with a troubled past. You have other friends like this, who have done things that are wrong by any metric you might name. Yet when you met them, they were different people, and you befriended and now even trust them. Sentient beings constantly make mistakes, well intentioned or otherwise. How are these circumstances any different?"

Harry could admit privately that Floppy had a point, after a fashion. He was less than certain he would or even could agree with the point fully, but there was a truth involved that was elusive and fleeting to his own way of viewing the world. "I need to sleep on this, Floppy," he finally offered. "I haven't really thought about it like that before. It's one thing to recognise that it's too raw to be fair, and another to disassociate completely like you suggest."

"Take your time, Harry. You hurt yourself in this, too, by carrying such bitterness inside. You don't want it to linger until you suffer dehiscence, do you?"

"Err, no."

"But the same argument applies to other events just the same."

Harry stood there wondering both where Hagrid was and whether he could honestly ascertain his own feelings regarding his dubious relatives, but another issue came to mind. "I've a return question for you, then, Floppy. Same topic. What do you think of Riddle's offer? That if I were to help him in some single task, he'd give himself up and go quietly to Azkaban for his crimes? Genuine or not?"

"As you know, Harry, I cannot reveal information I have learned from the minds of people I have examined. Based solely on the public information I have heard while sitting in the Headmaster's office, I am unsure if I know enough to answer the question. Perhaps the most I could say is that for Tom Riddle as I knew him, it is somewhat possible that the offer is genuine. For Lord Voldemort, it is also in the realm of possibility but very unlikely to be genuine."

“Yeah, but which one was I talking to?”

“Only you can decide that, Harry.”

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“Ginny’s comin’ down ‘ere fer lunch,” Hagrid announced into the silence. “Want ter stay yerself?”

The new pen was fully fenced, and Harry was hard pressed to think of a more exhausting morning in recent memory. Digging post-holes without magic was downright tedious in rocky ground. He was unsure what would require a ten-foot high fence of the strength that Hagrid had designed, but he was sure he would find out all too soon.

“Is it some kind of standing engagement?” Harry asked. “I wouldn’t want to intrude.” He was interested to know how the episode with Umbridge had turned out, however, and that would mean staying.

“Won’t be th’ first time Ginny’s had lunch wi’ me, Harry,” Hagrid said cheerfully. “She’d come ‘round fair often befor’ this year. Don’t see her so much now, but she seems happier.”

This statement, for its apparent contradiction to reality, confused Harry thoroughly. It made no sense, really. “Er, happier lately, or this year? I thought she was pretty depressed right now.”

“Oh, she’s maybe a bit o’ something sad now,” Hagrid agreed. “But even like this, she’s a sight better ‘n before. Used ter come an’ hide in me cabin more often than not.”

“Ah.” Harry paused to consider the implications of the surprising revelation that Ginny had spent considerable time with Hagrid in an effort to avoid whatever was out there. Here was another person pointing out how much her personality had shifted lately, and it left him as puzzled as before. He wanted to ask the question, but Hagrid’s friendship with him was too new compared to the man’s friendship with her to ask what he really wanted to. Something

generic and imprecise, however, would be a starting point. “Not to pry, Hagrid, but d’you know why she was having problems?”

Hagrid sighed, the magnitude and duration of the exhalation impressive even for a half-giant. “Nah. I tried askin’ a few times, but she’d clam right up. So’s I just tried t’ be a shoulder t’ cry on. Err, I shouldn’t o’ said that, ‘Arry. Don’t yeh be givin’ her a hard time over it.”

Harry shook his head, bemused and somewhat uncomfortable that he was both being confided in and sternly warned about his behaviour. “She’s my friend, too, Hagrid,” he offered quietly. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Hagrid said after a moment. “I’ve heard an earful abou’ yeh lately, Harry. I don’t think you’d do it, neither, unless yeh thought tha’ someone deserved somewhat. Problem is, yeh don’t seem ter know what is an’ isn’t kicking over th’ anthill.”

Ginny’s voice cut their conversation short as she walked to where they were standing. “Hello, Hagrid, how are you?”

“’ Ello, Ginny!” Hagrid boomed back at her. “Good ter see yeh.”

She tilted her head as she regarded Harry, and he took a moment to study what clues she offered. Given that she was not scowling or smiling, he supposed that the morning of interrogation followed by whatever else she had opted for left things equivocal in general. Harry nodded briefly, only saying, “Hey.”

Her reaction was merely to flex one eyebrow before she turned back to Hagrid. “I see you’ve put Harry to honest use, Hagrid. He could probably stand more of it, but I’m not sure the sweaty and dirty look is quite right on him.”

Hagrid laughed a bit, which caused Harry to pause and consider his appearance. He was rather thoroughly covered in dirt and grime from the knees down, with large streaks of the same all over the rest of his clothes. It was nothing magic would have a hard time with, assuming he cared to bother with it. In truth, he had enjoyed the menial labour

of digging holes and securing posts, as it gave him a distraction from everything else in the world while also allowing him to think a bit about the questions Floppy had raised.

“Well, ‘e’s helped me set up a new pen,” Hagrid told her. “D’you want Harry ter join us fer lunch, or should we send ‘im packin’?”

Ginny shot Harry a half-smirk before she answered. “Oh, he can join us, but only after he’s washed his hands and face.”

Knowing he was not going to win anything, Harry conceded the battle for the moment. “Yes, dear, I’ll wash first.” Her answering smile was almost worth the sarcasm, though he still felt she was playing a role rather than being true to her self at the moment.

“Look at it this way,” Hagrid suggested as they turned to walk back to the house. “Means Ginny can help w’ the motorbike after, eh?”

Harry had to smile as Hagrid so cavalierly offered a return path for Harry’s sense of justice. “Only if she’s not afraid of a little dirt and honest effort,” he retorted. “After all, she might get her hands dirty.”

Ginny’s scowl matched Hagrid’s chuckle as they walked along the new fence. “Bit o’ grease never hurt nothin’,” he agreed. “But then, I never knew li’l’ Ginny ter back down from a challenge, neither.”

She beamed at Hagrid before scowling back at Harry. “If you want help, all you have to do is ask for it.”

The statement was so loaded and ripe with tones that Harry almost missed a step. Ginny had fired a warning shot, though he was unsure to what the warning referred. Perhaps it was related to his handling of her brother or even her own training. Then again, it was just as likely to be about something he could never guess with a whole day to ponder it. “Err, right,” he finally agreed, not entirely sure what he was agreeing to. “While I’m not sure if we actually need another pair of hands, if you’d like to tinker, your aid would be welcome.”

“See?” she said to Hagrid, as though continuing some prior discussion. “He’s easy to handle.”

“Wish I could handle the pens as easily,” Hagrid muttered.

“What’s wrong, then?” Harry felt it was almost his duty to ask, given the wide opening Hagrid had left in the conversation. It also neatly changed the topic of conversation away from Ginny’s remark that he had apparently failed to grasp.

“Well, it’s the Nifflers, see,” Hagrid said as they looked into the small pen. “They keep disappearin’ when I leave ‘em alone fer a bit.”

“Disappearing?” Ginny sounded as perplexed as Hagrid looked, though Harry thought that pointing such out would be a mistake. “That’s odd. I’d suspect Fred and George, but I haven’t seem them with any small furry things lately.”

“I thought o’ that, too,” Hagrid muttered. “Been keepin’ an eye out, yeh know? Just t’ be sure.”

Harry filed away the information for later consideration. Apparently, his afternoon was already spoken for, between lunch and further work on Sirius’ old motorbike. And he still needed to track down Dumbledore. That meant another use of the map and trekking back to his trunk to fetch it, when the bike repair was done for the day.

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“My dad would have loved that,” Ginny said quietly as they entered the castle. “He’s obsessed with all things Muggle.”

“Yeah?” Harry’s mind kept drifting at random intervals back to the Nifflers and how they might be disappearing. It was hard to tell if there was something worth knowing about the situation or if it was just more magical mayhem around the castle. Either way, it was easier to think about than the other things he knew he should be contemplating. “Maybe some day you can bring him to where I live, and his curiosity could keep him busy.”



“Rather like the cat?”

“And the cat died happy,” he agreed.

“Harry!” Ginny’s voice held a note of warning in it. “Let’s not joke about that, all right?”

With a sigh, Harry nodded. “Sorry, didn’t mean it that way.”

“I know you didn’t,” she replied tersely. “Just start thinking before spouting, all right? You’re remarkably like Ron at times; it’s no wonder you two don’t get along well.”

Harry was unsure how to react to that particular statement. On the one hand, she was definitely being derogatory, while on the other hand she had provided a hint that might be useful in figuring out why he and Ron had failed to reach an accord – ignoring recent events, of course. “So how did it go with the Arts Madam?”

Ginny shrugged briefly. “My part was all right. She did try to get me to drink some tea, but I had a good excuse since we’d just left breakfast.” She looked about for a moment, though Harry could tell the Entrance Hall was quite empty. “I really dislike that woman. She’s either cloying or vindictive; there’s not much middle ground. She wanted to know what you’d told me, or what I thought, or what I was willing to guess at. I don’t think she liked my answers much.”

“Why? And you didn’t get more detentions, did you?”

She shook her head briefly. “No, thankfully. It might have been a close thing once or twice, but really, I didn’t do anything to warrant them, even for her.” They came to a stop in the corridor near the library, and Ginny paused as two Ravenclaw students walked by. Harry noted in passing that they kept their distance and scurried more than walked, but he chalked it up to his wonderful personality rather than the scowl he was wearing. Ginny’s words resumed as soon as the coast was clear. “At any rate, I told her you were showing me different ways to use magic, like the Lumos variants. And I told her

you were showing me how Muggles got in shape and helping me to do some basic exercises.”

“Ah. She didn’t like this because . . . ?”

“Well, she kept assuming we did other things, or talked about the Ministry, or that sort. No matter how I said no, she kept asking.” She shrugged for a moment. “It’s not like I wanted to explain that I took a fealty oath, now is it? Not much I could have said even if I wanted to.”

“Yeah, maybe. But thanks all the same, Ginny.” Harry made sure that no one was in hearing range and that the nearest portraits all had empty frames. “I know you’ve probably made some guesses and had some ideas, so I just wanted to thank you for leaving it be for now. Thanks, Ginny.”

Ginny said nothing for a while; instead, she studied him in a fairly direct manner. Harry found himself somewhat uncertain of her purpose, but he was willing to wait for her to work out whatever she needed to. “It’s the same, just in reverse, isn’t it? There are things I can’t tell you, though I’m not sure I would even if I could. You’re the same way. There are things going on you can’t tell me or might not want to. I’m just trying to make the best of the situation.”

Harry shrugged, somewhat uncomfortable with her intense focus and gentle voice. “Yeah, maybe. But thanks all the same.” She only nodded while continuing to study him, and Harry shifted a bit. She was clearly looking for something, but he had no idea what it might be. “So, is there anything else from Umbridge I should know about? With the others, maybe?”

“About that? No, I don’t think so.”

“That’s . . . interesting.” Her word choice and deliberate phrasing did not escape him even for a moment. “So what else should I be aware of that you’re wanting to tell me?”

“Madam Pomfrey did an Obliviate on Ron.” Ginny paused as Harry cringed at the idea of a Memory Charm. He really, really hated that

branch of magic and found the idea repugnant in ways that he would be hard pressed to ever articulate fully. "You probably want to avoid Hermione for a while, as she was muttering some really vile things about seeing justice one way or another. Ron won't remember it, of course, but you probably want to be, oh, more gentle with his psyche in the future. Madam Pomfrey said something about leaving the playing with the minds of others to people who were properly trained."

"Err, right," Harry agreed quietly. "No more scrambling of brains. So Ron will be okay now? He'll sleep more and stop avoiding Hermione?"

"Yes and no," Ginny replied. "The matron has decided that if his phobia is that bad, she's going to treat him for it. Hermione is helping, of course, both with the spiders and the, hmm, trauma of it all."

"Okay, so avoid Hermione as much as possible and leave Ron to his own phobia devices. No joking about entomophagy or the like."

"Pretty much." Ginny finally looked away from Harry for a moment before she turned back. "I can tell you want to be elsewhere, so I'm off to get some books from the library for Hermione. Just . . . think about things before you jump, all right? And try not to be so angry all the time."

"I'm not!"

"You may think that, but you don't honestly feel that way, do you?"

Harry scrubbed his hands through his hair, trying to get a handle on how Ginny kept pulling these things out. "Look, I'm not . . . trying to be angry or anything. I don't even think about being angry, I suppose. It's just there, like everyone else."

"No, Harry," she said firmly. "It's not like everyone else. Most people don't walk around doing anything they can to avoid thinking about something."

“How the hell do you know what I’m feeling, anyway?” Harry demanded. “How do you know when I’m being less than forthcoming?”

“I don’t, not unless I’m about this close to you.” She paused for a moment, and Harry had hope he would finally get an answer out of her. “I don’t think I can explain it, but I know when I’m standing near anyone if they’re happy, or sad, or whatever. Well, usually. There are a few I can’t quite figure out.”

With a sigh, Harry realised there would be no answer forthcoming. “Great. Just great. I’m leaking information, but I don’t know how or why. That’s a weakness, you know, and it could get someone killed.”

Ginny shrugged helplessly. “I really can’t explain it. It’s never been very consistent, but with you, it’s . . . well, it’s pretty much on all the time. Maybe it’s just because you’re constantly angry.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry muttered. “One more thing to worry about.”

“I’ll talk to you later, Harry.” Ginny gave him another once-over visually before she paused. “And you still need to clean up. Now it’s dirt, mud, and grease. Very attractive, Potter.” With that, she walked into the library, leaving Harry staring after her.

Remus might have an idea or two, Harry realised. It was clear that he was, somehow, somewhere, leaking information. Her answer provided a few clues, things he would have to test, but also provided useful heuristics he could apply. If what she said was correct, and given her own lack of understanding it might not be, then he could simply increase the distance between them, and everything would be the way it was before. And yet, as he thought about it, he realised that she always moved closer to him when she was determined to extract the truth of a matter.

He definitely needed to talk to Remus, but that was complicated due to the recent lack of communications at home. However, there was still the Transporter Box, and he could write a letter asking about it. Of course, he would preface any letter with a flame for their

avoidance, but that was another issue. At the moment, he needed to find Dumbledore and write a letter to his mentors. Both required access to his trunk.

Something was rotten in Hogwarts, and he was determined to get to the bottom of it.

To his surprise, Harry found a thick packet in his Transporter Box with a short letter on the outside. Tossing both onto his bed, he returned the box and resealed his trunk. Stooping slightly, he picked up the letter and flicked it open, pleased to see Sirius' messy scrawls all over the page.

Howler –

Minder has a means of following you that we have yet to unravel. He is preventing any face-to-face time at the moment. Rest assured, the Scoundrels are working on the problem. As soon as we have a solution, we're staging a raid and getting you out. In the short term, let me suggest a few things.

Remember to Look Up.

No meeting this weekend, for the reasons above. Sorry, kiddo.

Do not – and I mean do not – trust Minder or Librarian fully. They are manipulating things rather than discussing them, treating anyone else as incapable of having useful input. Maybe we've done a little of that, too, but not like this. Their aims may someday yield a positive result, but I can't pretend to like their methods or the costs.

Cobalt Sanctuary remains, but must be vacant when you are there. This will continue until we solve the little tracking problem. Moony has threatened to find a way to permanently alter signatures if all else fails. That reminds me, you still haven't told us how you did that trick. Now might be a good time to fess up.

Eagle is most distraught with the current situation. A letter would go a long way if the right one wrote it.

The second page here is the item you requested for Strawberry. It only has the primary mode, though. We can't make another exactly like ours unless we're on the inside, and with the new wards all over the place, we're not trying that unless necessary. Maybe we could trade arcane lore and you can finish it later. And when are you going to bring your lady-friend home to meet your parents, young man? I thought you had a proper sense of decorum!

Moony says that the McLaggan family appears to have a nephew in Hogwarts now, Cormac. He's heard the boy likes Quidditch and might even be in Gryffindor. Remus further says, "Go forth and make nice-nice."

The best picture is the one on top.

Riddle's an arse. I say we teach him some manners. What say you?

Don't be a stranger. We'll be writing daily now.

Padfoot, 22-Sep

Harry pulled out the second sheet and saw it was perfectly blank, though a bit ratty around the edges. Glancing again about the dormitory room to verify he was still alone, Harry tapped it briefly with his wand, saying, "I solemnly swear I am up to no good." Immediately the castle outline came alive, and he studied it for a moment before he saw that Dumbledore was in his office. With a tap, Harry wiped it back to blank before it finished drawing everything. Ginny at least would appreciate this finally arriving.

Harry opened the packet and extracted a set of film negatives and beautiful glossy pictures from his first night in the castle. The top picture was indeed perfect, showing a sleepy Colin staring in confusion, the boy's hair going every which way imaginable. While the picture-Colin blinked repeatedly in confusion, the picture-Seamus beat him soundly in the head with a pillow while shouting soundlessly. Then both fell out of the bed on opposite sides, looks of surprise on their faces as they turned to face the camera directly. The scene kept playing over and over again. Harry quickly thumbed through the rest of the pictures and had to admit that most of them were amusing on

some level. These too had taken a bit longer than he had originally promised, but little things were often lost in the wake of big things.

Chuckling, Harry held the packet in hand and stuffed the map for Ginny in his pocket. He had passed by both of the boys in question on his way in, so he could finally make good on his promise to hand over the pictures and the negatives. When he reached the common room, Harry did his best to ignore the unwanted attention again, instead heading straight for Seamus. While the Irish boy looked surprised at the packet Harry was holding out, there was thankfully no fear on his face.

Harry stood there as Seamus opened the envelope and slid out the pictures. Dean leaned over from the adjacent seat and promptly began laughing. Within a few seconds, Seamus was laughing as well, and then the pictures were flowing freely through the group by the fire. Pleased to see his foretelling of their eventual reaction coming true, Harry winked at Seamus and, after receiving a grin in return, left the common room. On his way out, he saw several others headed into the corner to see what had Seamus and friends laughing so hard.

Harry passed several students as he made his way to the headmaster's office, nodding slightly to the ones he recognised and trying to place names or faces with the ones he was unsure of. While he received little in response to his effort at being normal, were he asked then he could honestly say he was trying, and that was enough for the moment.

He was long overdue for a lengthy chat with the headmaster, and he was determined to finally make some forward progress. He needed both answers and to restart his hounding for advanced tutelage. As Harry drew to a stop at the gargoyle, he gave it a flat stare and considered his options.

"Hello again, Rocky. I'd like to have a chat with the boss. Are you going to cooperate?"

For a moment, Harry thought the gargoyle growled at him before he dismissed it as imagination. It had been too soft and gentle to be a stone growl, or at least he hoped so. Yet no further interaction was

necessary, as the guardian moved aside and made way for Harry to reach the headmaster's office.

Just as his raised hand was about to strike the door, it opened silently, and he saw Dumbledore sitting behind his desk, the one good hand holding a cup of tea while the short arm was in the man's lap.

"Good afternoon, Harry. I've been expecting you to drop by today."

"Really?" It was a tad bit grating to think the fellow had planned for Harry to drop by. That meant either Harry was becoming too predictable or he was being set up. "You might have let me know that. You know what they say about assumptions."

"Indeed." Dumbledore's eyes had their low-grade glow of amusement, and Harry knew his reaction had been expected just as much as he had been. "I had thought if you had not visited before dinner that I would contact you after dinner. I fear we have much to discuss, though perhaps not what you might want to hear."

Clearly, Harry needed to adjust his reactions. Taking a deep breath, he let it out slowly, trying to gain some distance from the chaos that was running through his mind. "There seems to be a lot of that going on at the moment, Headmaster." That was a safe opening statement. Of all the things to discuss, however, Harry felt he should meet his immediate obligations first. "I do have a few questions for you, but there's one that I'd like to ask before we discuss anything else."

"Oh? And what might that be, Harry?"

"Ginny Weasley." The headmaster raised one eyebrow in a sign of interest, or perhaps surprise, but otherwise was calm. While Harry thought it quite reasonable that they would need to discuss her role given Riddle's interest, he thought it somewhat unlikely that anyone could expect him to bring her up first. This would clearly be another issue to contemplate later, when he was in relative privacy. Maybe he was becoming too predictable. "At some point, I think it would help her confidence to know she's not in this mess alone. Or rather, she's not alone with a psychotic like me for her sole company. I'd like your



permission to take her to a meeting with others fighting against Riddle.”

“I see.” Dumbledore tented his fingers and surveyed the room slowly before looking back at Harry. “And who would be at this meeting?”

“My allies.”

Dumbledore shook his head slowly from side to side. “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to elaborate on that, Harry. As a student entrusted in my care, her safety is not something I will abdicate without due precaution.”

Harry had to remind himself to be calm and rational. Pointing out the inconsistency of that statement with the past handling of students in the castle, let alone outside, would get him nowhere. “I can understand that, sir, though we’ve already established your past credentials are uncertain here.” Dumbledore frowned a bit at the barb, but Harry was unrepentant. The truth was what it was, after all. “It would be a meeting of allies at my home. It’s rather a mixture of races, magical beings, and beliefs, really. Everyone there is under a binding fealty oath to someone, except for the leaders of each delegation. We’re under a much stronger oath to see to the downfall of Riddle.”

“You wish to avoid telling me their names?” Dumbledore’s voice held a note of curiosity, rather than accusation.

“Would a series of names you have never heard be of use? You know some of them, obviously, such as Remus, Sirius, and Edgar.” Harry paused for the headmaster to acknowledge the familiar ones. “To the best of my knowledge, you’ve never met or heard of the rest.”

“I see. And you believe this will help her, though she is not under any oath I am aware of?”

Harry was uncertain of whether the headmaster deliberately chose that phrasing, but he was not about to reveal anything to the contrary. “I do.”

“And you wish for her to feel safer, or perhaps part of a broader community?”

“Yes.” It was clear the man was driving at something, but what precisely he was after was uncertain.

Dumbledore remained silent for a sufficiently long period that Harry found it hard to sit still and keep the headmaster’s gaze. “As you pointed out, making assumptions is a risky proposition. I will agree to your request, but I place the following restrictions on it. They are non-negotiable.” His look became so intense that Harry found himself immediately nodding acceptance of any terms coming.

“First, you will use your secure Portkey to travel there and directly back. Second, no side trips away from your home are permitted at any time. Third, she may not be excused from classes or scheduled punishments for such a meeting. Fourth, you will provide me with a written notice at least one day in advance of the meeting, with both the expected departure and return times. I will not hold you to those times exactly, as few meetings run to schedule, but I expect you to make your best effort to see that these things are reasonable.”

When the list was over, Harry stopped nodding. He felt a bit silly reacting too quickly to one gaze, but he had done as much before with others. Sadly, most of the others were no longer alive. “That’s fine with me, sir. How shall I deliver notes to you? Owl post?”

Dumbledore visibly relaxed and let out a soft chuckle. “Given your last effort to deliver post, I have made other arrangements, Harry. The gargoyle will now accept parcels that fit into its mouth. These will be held securely until I collect them. For parcels larger than that which cannot be shrunk, Professor McGonagall has agreed to hold them for me should I not be available.”

Harry supposed the headmaster had a right to be defensive of his door guardian. “All right. And for Ginny’s sake, thank you.”

Dumbledore held up his hand briefly. "Let us continue with Miss Weasley for a moment, please. I have studied the letter you received and understand your concern and her lacklustre performance lately. I have spoken to her teachers and asked them to be accommodating as she recently received grave news of a personal nature. They know no more than that yet were sympathetic to the described problem."

"Do you want me to convey this to her?"

The headmaster nodded briefly. "If and when you think it might be useful in re-focusing her attention, yes. Until then, Harry, I doubt it would make much difference."

Harry genuinely smiled in appreciation. "That's generous of them and of you. Thank you."

Dumbledore waved the gratitude aside. "It is only proper. That said, their acceptance has distinct limits."

The threat was clear, though Harry supposed it was less a threat and more a statement of reality. "I see. I'll try to keep an eye on her."

"I shall hold you to that, Harry."

With the initial topic out of the way, Harry knew it was time to take the plunge into the heart of the matter. "And what of the substance of Riddle's words?"

"Regarding the Dursleys?"

Dumbledore's question threw Harry off track for a moment. It was surprising that he might consider Harry to be more concerned over his relatives than fighting Riddle. "No, actually. The implied threats, coupled to his exhortations in that mental confrontation . . . that substance. The Dursleys are nothing."

"Ah." The headmaster seemed to sag for a moment, though Harry was unsure why, but then he gazed back once more. "Then you are asking me about his offer to end things before war is inevitable?"

“As well as trying to help capture his followers, go quietly to Oz, that sort of thing,” Harry agreed. He was perplexed that he needed to reiterate the obvious, but then the headmaster had been rather preoccupied with other tasks as far as he could tell.

“That was most troubling, indeed,” Dumbledore said after a moment of silence. “Perhaps I should start with a bit of recent history. I have spent the past several days with Cyril reinforcing the wards on this castle. Your Mentor is now laying what wards of protection he can around other critical targets about the country. Unfortunately, we are only two old men, Harry, and lack the vigour of youth. The Ministry is unwilling to listen to anything we might say on the matter and is of no particular use in these efforts.”

Harry failed to stop the bitter chuckle that escaped his throat. “And the ICW is still in denial that this is an issue they should be involved with?”

Dumbledore shrugged briefly. “There are limits to what Vencil can do, Harry, even with evidence.” When Harry opened his mouth to protest, the headmaster held his hand up for patience. “I know that Edgar is quite adept at manoeuvring through politics. What would he say of the situation?”

Harry had to pause to consider that. Edgar would always assert that facts were irrelevant and that what people thought to be true was the only reality that mattered. “Probably the standard line about facts not being relevant. It’s the way they’re presented, the perception of reality, more than reality.”

“A useful description, if a little imprecise. It is the perception as presently viewed by the majority. Here, the majority of the Wizengamot believes what Minister Fudge’s office tells them is the truth, and the Daily Prophet reinforces that message. With the ICW, there are many pressing problems around the world, and Voldemort is not visibly influencing anything. Why should they change the views they have held for years if they do not perceive any reason to doubt the status quo?”

Sighing, Harry realised this line of discussion would only make him more bitter about the mess his life was. "Right, well, you'd know that better than I would. I've heard similar comments from others before."

Dumbledore looked as resigned to the situation as Harry felt, which provided some small level of relief. "Then you understand, Harry, that until Voldemort becomes more active, there is only so much that Cyril and I can do around our other duties."

"Yes, I can see that." A moment's reflection brought up a potential approach that would help all around. "I should ask, sir, can I help? To be honest, most classes here are fairly boring. Rote memorization was never my thing."

A wan smile crossed the headmaster's features before he resumed sipping from his cup. "You have had an unorthodox education, Harry. I daresay that classes anywhere would mostly be boring to you. I would like to thank you for the offer, but your skills do not extend to constructing nested wards, as I understand it?"

"No." Harry knew he should have pressed harder on that topic with Nicolas. "I've done a couple of very simple things on my own, but, well, that's really just one part of why I'm here. I can do single-shot wards, but that's it. Nicholas was supposed to teach me the more advanced warding procedures."

"I see. The types of work we are doing now are mostly detection and protection. Given how few people believe the threat exists, we cannot do more serious wards at this time." He paused to refill his cup of tea and simultaneously looked at Harry in inquiry. Harry shook his head in the negative, and Dumbledore resumed. "So we must rely on alarms and less obvious things such as magical buttresses to existing protections. These are beyond basic wards, Harry, though we shall begin tonight in learning them."

"So what can be done to get more people involved? Remus would help, if you showed him the variants, of course, as would some of our allies if he asked them to."

The headmaster nodded briefly at the suggestion, but his smile told Harry that the information was already known. "I have taken other steps to garner additional support. There was a group during the first conflict with Voldemort known as the Order of the Phoenix. I have reactivated this group, and we held our first meeting today. Remus was there, so I'm sure you will hear more details from him. For now, the group has agreed to reconvene and aid in the protection and monitoring of key locations. They will work primarily in Diagon Alley, around the Ministry, Hogsmeade, and other notable locations that have large magical populations."

The described function of his group surprised Harry, for it did not match his understanding of history. "I've heard of the Order before. Remus called them the 'old crowd' at times. I thought they took a more active role than just warding and spying?"

"They did, and most likely they will again. But as I have pointed out, we lack the support of the populace at this time, so our options are limited. Unless you would have us force protections on those who do not wish the restrictions they entail?" Dumbledore's voice made it plain what he thought of such ideas.

Harry could admit to himself that he might pre-emptively ward certain places, consent or no, but that was not Dumbledore's style. "Tempting as it might be to say yes, I do understand the point."

"I thought you would, Harry. Your peculiar blind spots do not appear to include tactical issues."

"Err," Harry interjected, uncertain of the underlying message. "I'm not sure that was a compliment."

"A bit of both, really," Dumbledore replied. It was clear the man thought he was speaking directly, but to Harry it was still an uncertain message. "We are all human, Harry. We each have strengths and weaknesses. As long as we work on improving ourselves in the right directions, then all is as it should be."

“I suppose,” Harry agreed after a moment. He was now confident that the man was trying to score a point about the attitude of others, in particular Harry, but it seemed atypically heavy-handed. Harry thought the best solution was just to ignore it. “Is there anything else about your ‘old crowd’ meeting that I need to be aware of?”

“For the purposes of our oaths? No, I don’t believe so. If you are interested in the trivial aspects, I suppose I could tell you who ordered what for tea. I rather had a delightful scone of spiced apples.”

“Ah, no, thank you. Since you’ve told me why we haven’t been meeting lately, and what’s been going on in other events, I guess I should do the same.” Harry shrugged for a moment, trying to decide how to say it, before just opting to state it outright. “The truth is, you know everything I’ve been doing. I haven’t actually done anything to push the fight against Riddle since we last met.”

“I’m not sure that’s entirely correct, but I do understand why you might think so.” Dumbledore paused there, sipping his tea, and Harry wondered what he was waiting for. Apparently satisfied at whatever conclusion had been reached, he set his cup down. “If our old business and obligations are taken care of, Harry, I would like to discuss the events from the Gaunt House, the Malfoy Polyjuice, and your recent experience with Voldemort in that marvellous construct of his.”

“You mean someone’s going to actually discuss those with me? I may go into shock.”

The headmaster sighed briefly. “Harry, it was never my intention to cut you off from everyone. I cannot speak for Cyril, of course. From where I sit, events outpaced our ability to handle them, and we have been dealing with the complications accordingly.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get the idea. Where do you want to start?”

“The ring. I have reviewed the events that transpired with Cyril several times. I would like to hear your thoughts on the matter since we last discussed it, before I explain mine.”

“ Hmmm.” Harry had spent considerable time contemplating everything that had happened when they retrieved the ring. He had drawn some tentative conclusions but had yet to share them with anyone. Normally, he would present them to Remus and Sirius, and the three of them would slowly hash them until everything had become more certain. Lacking their opinions, he was left presenting a weak theory, but really there was no one else to talk to at the moment. “The obvious part to me now, in hindsight, is that the ring was meant to be found. The protections were serious protections but not meant to stop determined, qualified wizards. I almost want to say that the protections were qualifying the invader to be worthy of the ring. Does that make any sense?”

“I believe I can see your logic, Harry. The warding was too obvious, you think, and too easily overcome by skilled wizards.”

“Sort of. There was also the compulsion on the ring itself. Anyone who went there would have been looking for it, and it was set perfectly to get someone to wear it after a few more hurdles were overcome.” Harry paused to hold up two fingers. “First the challenges tested your skill, and then they tested your intelligence. If you passed both, you put the ring on and suddenly lost free will. With all due respect, sir, from what I know of you, I can’t imagine a mere Compulsion Charm overriding your private willpower.”

Dumbledore chuckled softly, but it was obviously without real mirth. “Cyril made much the same comment, though a bit more pointed. Please go on.”

“There’s not much more, sir,” Harry offered with a shrug. “I still don’t understand why the, well, raw magic was pooled in that fashion. I don’t understand where the Cynocephs came from, either. They weren’t conjured, I don’t think. I know they were linked to the ring somehow, but the details are . . . inexplicable at this point.”



“You do realise, Harry, that we will never truly know what was meant to happen? It is unlikely that Voldemort would ever share such with us.”

“That’s rather obvious, sir.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” the headmaster said with a vague gesture toward the window. “Your specific line of thinking is one Cyril and I had not contemplated as yet. It was obvious that the ring was guarded, much like any pharaoh would protect his treasures for the after-life. That the protections might be, as you said, a qualification trial is a new concept. While I am reluctant to agree immediately, I find your view regarding the setting as one elaborate trap plausible and worth further consideration. We have been more focused on the events involving the ring itself.”

“So what conclusions did you arrive at? And did Cyril agree with them?”

“We both are in agreement to a large degree,” Dumbledore said after a moment. “You are correct that neither an Imperius Curse nor a Compulsion Charm will work on me. We both know what was actually used, but I have never actually encountered it before. And it achieved an effect we have not previously dealt with. Tell me, what do you recall of Poppy’s diagnosis of my wounds that night?”

Harry had to stop and think to remember that night at all, let alone what specifically someone did or did not say. “I believe she said that your body showed signs of every spell used on you.”

“Yes, she did. And yet I failed to react physically to those spells. Why would that be?”

“I’m not certain. I thought it was a Compulsion Charm for that reason – you were compelled to ignore pain or the like.”

“But that does not explain why the Stunner simply failed to work, Harry. Let me ask you this. Are you particularly ticklish?”

“Ah, no, not really,” Harry offered with a smile. “You can try if you like.”

“That won’t be necessary. But if you are struck with the Rictusempra Charm, do you not find yourself overwhelmingly ticklish and simultaneously tickled?”

“Yes . . .” Harry paused to consider the question. It was odd that neither Remus nor Nicolas had ever asked that question previously. He would need to write a note to Remus, asking him to consider the question as well. “I hadn’t thought of it that way before.”

“So you see the problem that exists. This rather simple magic bypasses the normal body functions and directly over-rides the nervous system. My conjecture is that the magic upon the ring was a very advanced form of the same family of magic. That’s a gross oversimplification but still useful as a starting point.”

“So you’re saying it . . . essentially disconnected your brain and used your body as a host?”

“Precisely, Harry. I suspect that had you not stopped my body, it would have done some pre-arranged task under the direct control of the ring. If your speculation on the nature of the trap is correct, then perhaps it would tap the magical skills of the host to achieve its programmed task. Tell me, did you find it odd that you won that battle?”

“Honestly?” Harry knew there was no room for boasting in this discussion, and he was under no illusions. He never should have won that fight, not if Dumbledore was in full control of his faculties. “I thought I was incredibly lucky. You had me completely beaten, twice, but didn’t follow through. That allowed me to try again.”

“And do you think I would do that in a real fight?”

“I’d like to say no, sir, but I don’t honestly know.”

“Let me put it this way, Harry. I have never lost a duel I was conscious for, but I also avoid killing blows. While I have respect for your agility of mind and magic, were we to truly duel in such an unrestricted contest, I feel it would be quite unlikely you would win.”

Harry laughed softly, and he saw Dumbledore's eyebrows rise as he continued chuckling. “In all honesty, sir, I feel rather the same.” Dumbledore relaxed and smiled back, telling Harry that the humour was understood. “That's part of why I'm here, after all. I know I need to learn more to be on Riddle's level, but there are very few living wizards or witches that could come close to teaching me what I need to know.”

“Which you remind me of every time we meet, Harry,” Dumbledore said with a small smile. “I will not forget. That aside, we believe the ring was meant to force the host body to do some set task on the behalf of Voldemort. Perhaps your ‘testing theory’ is appropriate, in that if the host lacked sufficient skills, the task could not be completed with any measure of certainty. But we firmly believe that the Cynocephs were summoned when the ring was activated. Perhaps they were to act as guardians of the controlled host, or perhaps they were there for some other purpose. But they never launched an attack at my body, while they did attack everyone else.”

“No,” Harry agreed slowly as he remembered the details. “No, they didn't. I hadn't noticed that at the time.”

“And so we now have a line of speculation, though it's not clear how useful it may be.”

The silence stretched out between for a while until the fire popped and startled Harry into focusing on the headmaster again. “Did you or Cyril think of anything else about that fight?”

“Yes. We had a question specifically for you. What form of Apparition was it that you used, Harry? During the fight, that is. Neither Cyril nor I have seen it before.”

“Err, Remus calls it Instant Apparition. Only I can do it currently, though I’ve been trying to explain it to Remus for a few months now. He thinks he might be able to learn it, but it gets tangled up in his years of Apparating normally.”

Dumbledore nodded slowly. “I noticed it did not involve the usual movements and was much faster than normal – if a trifle loud. What is it, exactly?”

“A trifle? You might need your hearing checked,” Harry retorted. “As for the magic . . . the best I can do is describe the effects. Normally, you sort of drill through space and squeeze through the hole – that allows you to go beyond line of sight. Your magic displaces your volume of air at the target by moving it to where you start from, and you can sort of control the noise level by controlling the speed of transfer. It’s just air rushing from one place to another. Right?”

“Yes. I haven’t heard it described quite that way, but it’s very accurate.”

“Right. So what I did instead was essentially punch a hole through space.” At Dumbledore’s look of surprise, Harry shrugged. It was hard not to feel somewhat embarrassed with the story, but the man had asked. “It’s very draining, because there’s no folding. I literally acted like a bulldozer and pushed my way through everything between where I started and where I stopped. It’s limited to line of sight, and if you run through anything – insects, shrubs, the like – it’s going to hurt a lot when you get there. If you try to go through a tree, you’ll kill yourself. It’s also very, very draining to do magically.”

“Most interesting. I wonder how many other students make that mistake and fail to notice the difference? From the noise generated, any instructor would make them stop and re-focus.”

“Does it matter?” Harry was genuinely curious about the answer. After all, if it had some advantage other than life-or-death gambling, he would like to find out. “It’s of very limited utility, really. Aside from life-and-death situations, I’d much rather do things the normal way.

Remus just wants to learn how to do it because he can't stand the idea that I can do something he's unable to."

"Remus always has been rather curious. And no, I'm not sure if it has much use, but I will think on it."

"Just let me know, sir, all right?" Harry asked with a grin. "It'd be nice to be harassed less about it."

Dumbledore's smile in return promised nothing, which surprisingly made him think of Sirius. It appeared neither liked to give up on a bit of embarrassing events. "Very well, Harry, thank you for answering that. Let's move on. What of the orb? My understanding of Remus' theory would preclude such a construct from functioning. The distance should be too great for the power required to make it work. Last time we discussed it, you believed it was fed from me. How has time changed your views?"

Sighing, Harry gave up on the humour of the prior situation. "It was fed from you. I thought you agreed with that."

"I suspect that, Harry, but do not know that." Dumbledore held Harry's gaze until he nodded acknowledgement of the semantic differences. "While I have familiarised myself with Remus' work, I am not as expert in it as you are. How confident are you that it was powered from me? Aside from circumstantial indicators."

"Sir, with all due respect, the 'circumstantial indicators' were far too strong and too well aligned. Madam Pomfrey said your magic was unresponsive to her tests, yet I could see your aura flaring and flowing constantly. It was powered from you, as that is the explanation that fits best – your magic was being siphoned off for other uses. When I disrupted it later, you became yourself." When Dumbledore continued to look sceptical, Harry threw his hands up in the air. "Ask Remus, then. He'll agree with me."

Dumbledore smiled for a moment before answering. "I already have, Harry, and he does agree with you. I had simply hoped one of you might have an alternative suggestion." Dumbledore held up his hand

to stop Harry's retort to the subterfuge. "Consider the implications that must arise if we take that answer. How did Voldemort use me to power his device? How did Voldemort know that I was susceptible to be used in such a manner? Moreover, are we certain the orb was sent to you as a means of communication? Or was he surprised as well at the outcome?"

"Honestly, sir, I don't know. Maybe he had something set up in the wards to notify him if they came down. Maybe a Muggle reported the destruction of the cottage. That, I don't know. But I'm as certain as I can be that you were the power source for the orb. That ring tampered with your magic and your mind most foul. You do know what the 'owth Qayin is, don't you? That's what Crowley said it was."

"Yes, it's the Mark of Cain curse, but a stronger version. I do wonder where you learned of it, though."

"Nicolas spent years drilling me on Dark Arts," Harry offered with a shrug. He knew that Dumbledore would never consider doing the same to a student, but it was a philosophical difference that was entirely academic at this point. "While I promised someone dear to me I would never use the things I learned, that doesn't mean I don't know much of the work intimately. He thought it would foolish to limit our studies to human Dark Arts."

"I see." As expected, Dumbledore did not appear to be pleased. "I do not think I would have done the same were our positions reversed, but there's little I can do about it now. You agree that the binding I was under fits the problems of the orb?"

"Definitely." No matter how Harry thought about it, it always came back to the same answer, thanks to Ockham's Razor.

"Hmm." Dumbledore pushed back from his seat and moved to stand beside Fawkes. The phoenix had sat silently throughout their exchange and remained so as Dumbledore stroked its feathers. "From your monologue relaying the events of the orb, I had the impression that Voldemort was surprised once or perhaps twice. That he was not fully prepared for what went on. Would you agree?"

Harry could only shrug. His memory was fading with time, and he was unsure what might qualify as 'surprise' on the behalf of his nemesis. "Honestly, it's been too long for me to say with any certainty. Maybe he was, but if so it was in ways I wouldn't dare to guess at."

"If I had not been available, would the orb have worked?"

"I doubt it, sir."

"Again, Remus said the same," Dumbledore murmured. "And what if I were not the one to have succumbed to the ring? What if you had, for example?"

"Well, there's really no way of knowing, is there? Why?"

Dumbledore turned away from the window and faced Harry directly. "Imagine for a moment, Harry, that he knew the ring had been taken. When the ring was taken and no one subsequently showed up under compulsion, what would he be likely to do? Whom would he immediately turn his suspicions to for the loss of his ring?"

Harry sighed for a moment. This was a bunny trail that would serve no purpose, as far as he could tell. "To be fair, Headmaster, this is pure speculation and not very useful. I can't predict him at all."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. Would it be safe to assume that he would have additional ways to force the supplanting of full consciousness should the Mark of Cain fail?"

"Maybe."

Dumbledore began pacing back and forth in the office, striding from the phoenix's perch to the fireplace and back. "Then the ultimate question you wish to explore, of whether Voldemort's offer of repentance was genuine or not, is one that is clouded by the possibility that he had some other agenda in mind. Perhaps he never meant to have that conversation with you at all. Then again, perhaps he did. But I wish for us to be clear that we do not know why contact

was initiated, or whether he was being honest during your conversation.”

“That’s been rather obvious, don’t you think?” Harry knew his sarcasm was coming out rather strongly, but the man’s comments seemed self-evident.

“Assumed yet not stated is not necessarily obvious to all, Harry.”

Harry had to groan at the pointed reminder he typically delivered to others. Not wanting to watch the pacing or see the amused smile from the headmaster, Harry put his head in his hands as he leaned over his feet. “Yeah, all right. I deserved that.”

“Do you feel he was being honest?”

“That’s the question I want you to answer, Headmaster.”

Harry heard Dumbledore drop back into his chair with a soft thump and looked back up. The man seemed to deflate from his earlier vigour, all signs of energy gone. “I cannot, not in a meaningful way. The approach and offer are sadly all yours for the deciding.”

“You’re saying you can’t offer any insight into the situation?”

“That’s not what you asked for, Harry,” Dumbledore said after a moment’s hesitation. “Insight I can offer, but it is fraught with peril – much like any attempt at divination is. You understand this?”

“Of course.” That was another self-evident statement as far as Harry was concerned.

“Then I would say that it is not impossible for Tom Riddle to be genuine. Perhaps he did ‘wake up’ as it were.”

“That’s it?” Harry knew he sounded rather petulant at the moment, but all of this build up had gone precisely nowhere. “You sound like Floppy.”



“I’m sorry?”

Harry concentrated on his breathing for a moment to get his voice back under conscious control. It would not do to start yelling at the headmaster for increasing his irritation; it was not really the headmaster’s fault. “Floppy told me something similar – that Riddle might be capable of that, but Voldemort probably wasn’t. Couldn’t tell me which one I actually talked to, though.”

“Well, I suppose I do sound like Floppy, then. I would certainly agree with the basics of that assessment. But while I think that Voldemort, as he has become, could genuinely be telling the truth, it is very unlikely in my mind that he is doing so. The problem is one we are both familiar with: it only takes one traumatic event to change a life profoundly, Harry, as you well know, so such an occurrence might shake Voldemort to his core and produce a sense of remorse. That said, I would reinforce Floppy’s assertion that it is less likely that Voldemort might feel such things. I would probably characterise it as unlikely in the extreme but not strictly impossible.”

“And you have no thoughts on which one I was probably talking to, either?” That had not come out as particularly hopeful, but it also had not come out as accusatory. Harry would take what he could get away with for the moment.

“No, I would say not. This is the problem that I was trying to explain earlier. We have no idea why you were contacted or what the context of the contact truly was. If this were an arranged meeting that had been well established, it would be a different story. An impromptu situation, where potentially neither side is completely prepared, is very hard to analyze properly.”

Harry put his head back in his hands, wondering why he bothered seeking out the headmaster to talk to. At least with Sirius or Remus he would be entertained with the frustration. “So when he comes calling again, what then? Shall I bring him round for tea?”

Dumbledore clearly ignored the barb, as his voice remained calm. “Ultimately, Harry, you must do as you see fit. I would hope you

would take steps to try to discern the veracity of his claims or look for the hidden dagger in each gesture. While I believe everyone can change for the better, it would take a significant act of contrition for me to believe this overture you have received. And yet, if he really is genuine, I would find it challenging to ignore the request. Avoiding a war that will invariably kill thousands is worth the effort to evaluate the potential skulduggery properly.”

“In other words, keep your eyes open and see what happens.”

“A bit too simplified, but the right idea. The question is whether Voldemort is in essence divided and now houses some of Tom Riddle’s former humanity once more.”

Harry stopped trying to keep his sarcasm in check. “Right. Lovely. Thanks.”

“I am sorry, Harry, that I cannot offer more. We are all only human, after all. This is a very difficult position for you to be in.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Harry waved off the empty words and stood up himself, stretching his legs and walking back over to the bookcase. There were several books there he wanted to study, but he had time – or at least, he hoped he did. “And his tagging of Ginny?”

“Is that not why you no longer associate with the same people? You are making an effort to cloud the reliability of his information gathering?”

“Doesn’t it bother you that he has spies reporting from here?”

While Harry knew Dumbledore was not truly unflappable, he supposed it was conversations like this that made the man seem so. “There are roughly three hundred students in this castle, Harry. On any given day, many write home to their parents. What are the odds of anything in this castle remaining secret for more than a few hours, let alone a few days or weeks?”

“In other words, no.”

“Each person here has fundamental rights, Harry. I will see to it that people are innocent until proven guilty. I will not prohibit open communications from child to family, ever. I apply these rules to you, as well.”

Harry had to grudgingly concede the point. If it had been up to the rest of the sheep, he would have been kicked out to the curb weeks ago. Had it been up to the ministry, he would probably have been executed. “All right, all right. I get it. But it sounds like you’re ultimately agreeing with my assessment that Ginny is the only firm target?”

“I am unsure I would agree with that at all. Is Ginny a target? Perhaps, but it is just as likely he is goading you into rashness and using her as a vehicle for it. If she is a target, then so are the other students you previously associated with frequently. Is that not the reason you agreed to see that they receive advanced instruction in defence?”

Harry had to look at Dumbledore, but the man was as calm as ever. Only the eyes gave anything away, and they were twinkling brightly. “Do I want to know how you know that?”

“As I said, Harry, secrets do not survive long in this castle, particularly if you are headmaster.”

“Hmmm,” Harry offered in return. Perhaps the man had more than the portraits at work for him. “So you’re not going to discourage this effort, then?”

“Certainly not. I should like to encourage you, actually, but cannot do so officially. While your indirect approach may work for a bit, I believe you will need to step in personally before long to run the, hmm, ‘club’ shall we say.”

“I see.” Harry had to chuckle softly to himself, thinking of Dumbledore playing machinations on the scale of the ICW, the Wizengamot, and even amongst a bunch of kids in a secluded castle.

The man had far too many fingers in far too many pies, but he supposed it was a way to pass the time.

“You’re out of questions already, Harry?”

Harry was surprised at the question and realised he had been staring blankly at the books in front of him for some time. “Hardly. I think I’m in shock from actually having my questions answered instead of having everyone avoid me.”

“You are welcome to come by at any time, Harry, to discuss such matters. If I am unable to talk, I will let you know.”

Another question leapt to mind, based on their earlier comments. “So what about that Malfoy debacle, then? That seemed downright stupid, to be blunt.”

“Yes, the logic was strange, was it not? From everything I have been told, Harry, Mr Malfoy almost seemed pleased to be sent to Azkaban.”

Harry had to shake his head slightly and suppress a shiver. His memories of being inside the prison were still strong enough to invoke that reaction. “That disturbs me, sir.”

“I admit that I feel similarly. I cannot imagine anyone happy to go to that place.”

“No, I can’t either.”

“And, Harry,” Dumbledore said softly, “I’d like to point out one other related aspect. Voldemort offered to turn himself in and serve time in Azkaban. Why would both of them want to be inside the prison? And more importantly, in the prison as prisoners?”

Harry had no answer to the question. Moreover, he realised he had no way to even start guessing at what might be a plausible answer to the question. And that realisation was ultimately something that had to change. “I don’t know, sir.”

“Neither do I, Harry, and that bothers me almost more than the other questions.”

Harry sat back down in the seat he had formerly occupied. With a sigh, he looked up at Dumbledore, who regarded him as seriously as he knew he was regarding the headmaster. “What about Malfoy’s heir, then? Draco?”

“I have been led to believe that he is claiming ignorance of his father’s actions. I’m sure Edgar will have more to say on that when you see him next, but he is at Durmstrang as we speak. No charges have been or will be filed against him, but he was strongly encouraged to attend elsewhere.”

“Huh. That’s surprising.” Harry trailed off into silence, and Dumbledore said nothing in return. It was odd, but after a protracted conversation, he was feeling more exhausted than he had in days. Between the physical exertion of building Hagrid’s new pen and the emotional and intellectual ride of the too-long delayed conversation with Dumbledore, Harry had to admit that he was drained. “I’m having a hard time remembering what else I wanted to discuss with you . . .”

“Shall we begin our discussion of wards, then, and their foundations? There is ample time before the evening meal.”

“Yeah. If I remember the other questions, I’ll bring them up.”

“Excellent. You have been reading Mr Forte’s most excellent introductory text, I recall.”

Dumbledore’s off-hand comment grabbed Harry’s brain and shook it briefly. “That text is introductory?”

“Quite, Harry. The advanced material is elsewhere, of which I have several excellent books. But your book lays a very thorough foundation for everything that comes after, and that is more important.”

“Right,” Harry mock growled. “More late nights for me, then.”

“Learning as a job is a rare opportunity in life, Harry,” Dumbledore said with his eyes twinkling brightly. “Enjoy it while you can. Let us start with the distinction between the buffer and the directly powered ward, for this is the key to nesting.”

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Harry’s mind was still spinning when he came down the stairs from the headmaster’s office. The overwhelming fragility of isolated wards was dominant in his mind, and the discussion had gone quite far in helping him to understand why wards were almost always created in clusters, or nested as the terminology went. Their acute sensitivity to power fluctuations made them easily defeated alone, but when placed together with a proper nesting of buffers and drains, the result could be stronger than dozens of magic users.

With a vague notion that he needed to find Ginny and give her the map he had received, Harry failed to notice the hand that attempted to seize his shoulder until it was nearly too late. The bloody suit of armour had laid in wait for him, and it was continuing to grab for him as he spun away.

With a growl of frustration, Harry had his wand out and blasted the armour back into its component pieces. Glaring at the frustrating metal, Harry decided it was time to take additional, firmer steps with the annoyingly animated construct.

“Problems, Harry?”

Harry turned to see Neville standing just at the corner, and his friend looked mildly amused at the destruction on the floor. “No,” Harry said calmly. “Not at all.”

“Right. Not at all.”

It was apparent that even Neville was starting to see through his façade, and that was just completely unacceptable. He liked Neville

well enough, but Harry needed the security of his secrets and ability to bluff.

Ignoring the smile from his friend, he drew both wands. With the left, he levitated the collection of armour bits, and with the right, he began casting Sticking Charms to the pieces, bonding them to the ceiling every five or six paces as he walked along.

“No problems at all, Neville,” Harry said pointedly.

Neville just nodded, his eyes glued to the last piece of armour, which was now all but lost in the shadows on the ceiling. “Right. I believe you, Harry.”

“Good,” Harry shot back.

“Well, I’m meeting Ginny and Hermione for a ‘defence review’ session. You’re not going there, are you?”

Harry thought Neville had shifted from humour to fear fairly quickly. “I hadn’t planned on it. Why?”

“Well,” Neville said after a moment of hesitation. “I think you might want to avoid Hermione for a bit. She’s rather cross with you.”

“More so than yesterday, you mean.”

“Yes,” Neville quickly agreed. “And she’s acting a bit weird, too.”

“Oh?”

Neville glanced around in a manner that Harry thought was fairly exaggerated, but apparently it satisfied his friend. “She’s been casting spells with funny words,” he whispered. “I heard her say ‘wooga wooga’ and her wand lit up like mad.”

It was all Harry could do to avoid swearing profusely. Hermione had already beaten their efforts at disassociating specific words from casting a spell, and it had taken her a mere two weeks. Then again,

she had a powerful motivator in seeing others do something she could not, if he understood what Ginny had been trying to tell him before. Perhaps his prior joke about a kindred spirit for Remus was more correct than he knew.

“Err, right,” Harry said after a moment of getting his vocabulary under control. “I suspect it’s just a passing fad. No harm, no foul.”

“I’m not so sure,” he muttered. “She’s also been spending a lot of time with Fred and George. That can’t be good. And I hear your name a lot when they do talk.”

Harry had to admit that Neville had a point. Fred and George were amusing yet predictable, always relying on a system to achieve an effect. While the magic was impressive, it was still easy to see coming. Aiming for revenge on behalf of her and her beau, Harry would not put it past Hermione to turn to the twins. And with Hermione aiding them, all bets would be off for what came next.

“That’s a good warning to have. Thanks, Neville.”

“Yeah, no problem, Harry,” Neville said. “I should go. I’m going to be late.”

“Oh, wait,” Harry said before Neville could move. Pulling the blank parchment for Ginny out of his pocket, he handed it to Neville. “Since you’re about to see Ginny, can you give her this and tell her it’s compliments of the Marauders?”

“The Marauders?”

“Yeah. She’ll know what it is.”

“Sure. I’ll see you later, right?”

“Assuming the twins don’t catch me, yeah,” Harry agreed. “Thanks, Neville.”



With a wave, Harry headed back to Gryffindor tower. He had perhaps an hour left before the evening meal, and that was plenty of time to write a letter back home. After a bit of haranguing over their recent behaviour and a rehash of the Dumbledore conversation, things would start sorting themselves out.

Harry also made a note to write a second letter, just to Sirius, to see if Remus had been gloating lately. The man always did carry on in a certain manner after he pulled a successful prank, and that lemming caper needed to be addressed in the proper forum.

Beyond that, he would write the recommended letter to his father and try to make sure everything was all right. Tossing in a few enquiries for Edgar would give his father something to occupy his mind and make him feel like he was contributing more. Hopefully that would ease whatever concerns had him so worked up that Sirius had raised the issue.

This chapter was truncated due to length. The second half will be coming along in a bit. That said, it was a chapter with answers! Well, sort of and maybe, with a few caveats and assumptions and people just not certain of their ideas. But it does help a bit, now doesn't it? It's all clear as mud.

Thanks to the beta team . . .

## Chapter 30 -- Special preface A/N:

During part of this chapter, the characters discuss some of the realities of war, including describing methods of torture and murder. The descriptions are drawn from real-life examples of war. Clarification for the exact content reference is at the end of the chapter. If this discussion will bother you, skip the third scene, which is a discussion between Remus and Ginny.

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### Level Two Occlumency

Passive shielding is a natural refinement to the active shielding of Level One Occlumency. For many, the transition into Level Two is nearly automatic with sufficient practice of Level One, yet that does not invalidate its status as a unique stage in mental defence preparation.

Recall that in the early development of Occlumency skill, the battle for mental control begins with the successful recognition of attempts at entry into one's mind. Through extensive practice or exposure to invasion, the student should become adept at recognising fleeting thoughts of material primarily learned to be a fringe barrier as a sign of attack. This in turn will lead to the battle of mental focus and willpower, where the defender concentrates on a sole memory to limit the invader's ability to access memories with impunity.

Once the defender has attained the strength of willpower to withstand focused attacks, the problem becomes the inability of the defender to do anything beyond locking that one memory in place to the exclusion of all other conscious thought. This leaves the defender in an unsound position, susceptible to further outside attacks of a physical or magical nature. The key to moving beyond the limitation of Level One is an understanding that the human brain is capable of an information overload.

Rather than focusing on a single memory to the exclusion of all else, the defender instead constructs a careful “loop” of memories seamlessly tied together. The construction of this memory loop is the primary hurdle in learning Level Two as a successful defensive mechanism. The goal is to overwhelm the capacity of the invader to fully process what is being discerned through Legilimency by throwing a very fast string of memories into the invasion’s focal point. The invader then becomes encumbered by the effort of understanding and sorting the images, but will quickly realise the false nature when the loop begins to repeat. Therefore, the maximum gain must be achieved in a single pass of the loop, inundating the recipient with vivid moments. Thus the optimal mix of memories will oscillate between extreme settings of love, hate, kindness, cruelty, and so forth.

When the invasion is recognised, the defender exerts less willpower to present a stream of memories than with the static setting. This in turn enables the defender to secure their physical defences as rapidly as possible. This could be achieved by breaking visual contact with the invader, moving toward physical barriers, or even Apparating away. The primary aim is to overwhelm the invader with too much information, thereby creating a window of opportunity to escape or neutralise the attacker as he tries to process the deluge of data.

The principle drawback of Level Two shielding comes from the fact that it is easier for the invader to redirect the moving scenes of memory, precisely because they are not a static image. Attempting to hold an invader inside a memory loop requires more mental focus and willpower than a Level One defence would. Redirecting physical objects in motion is less effort than putting an object into motion, modulated by the degree of redirection based on the original trajectory. In similar vein, if the memory loop sequence is too near the underlying thoughts sought by the invader, it becomes a high-risk scenario that . . .

. . . Excerpt from Theory of Magic, Volume IV: Skills, Gifts, and Legacies, Section I: Mind Arts, edited by R.J.L.

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Sat, 31 Aug 1991

“Do you understand your instructions?”

Draco Malfoy paused to consider the question. His father had been unbearable for the past several days and then had abruptly shipped Draco and his mother to France for the entire week before his first year at Hogwarts was to begin. It had been entirely unexpected. His father had offered no explanations, and his mother's reaction made it clear that no questions were to be asked. As soon as they returned, the half-wit Dobby had summoned Draco to his father's study, where nothing made sense any more. All of the things he had been led to believe would be his at Hogwarts were now changed, again without rationalisation, and only the strangeness of the situation kept his tongue at bay.

“I apologise, Father. I have understood your instructions and will carry them out, but I do not understand the reasoning for them.” Draco bent his head, firmly expecting his father's customary rebuke. Draco hated hearing the tone of disgust that would creep into his father's voice, as though he were unworthy of bearing the name Malfoy, let alone standing to inherit the family empire.

“Look at me, Draco,” his father commanded. There was, thankfully, no recrimination, only calm control and the firm hand of authority. “You are not old enough to see the bigger picture properly, though you are finally showing some signs of maturity. Until I am convinced you will see things appropriately, these changes are the way things will be. The explanation is beyond my confidence in your understanding. I will try to convey some of the logic, however, until you are prepared and trustworthy enough for the complete explanation. Ask what you will.”

“I see, Father,” Draco said while keeping his eyes forward as demanded. It was rare that his father was so open on any topic, so this must be something that his father desired very strongly. Draco was not sure whether his instructions were related to the events that had precipitated Draco's abrupt removal to France, but only a fool would think anything that happened in this room was unrelated to

every other event his father handled. "Will this not cause problems with the other Families? It appears to me that we are breaking prior verbal agreements."

Lucius sighed, and Draco winced internally. He had failed to make a connection somewhere, and his father was not a patient man, willing to explain things repeatedly. "No, Draco, we are not breaking any agreements. It is vital to our family interests that we secure this change. We are not committing to anything more than claiming her as a secured asset bound to our Family. Nothing more or less is promised, though time will show what other options may exist."

"But why a Weasley? They are too many mouths and have no status, though their blood is pure enough," Draco asked.

"That is one of the two options we have, Draco. Bonds and debts are not common enough to warrant this situation."

"So you are not proposing a suiting contract?"

"No, Draco. It is exactly as I told you." Lucius tapped the edge of the desk with his cane briefly. "That would be false pretence and far above her station. You will have many choices for a future bride. Today, it is necessary to secure her as an extension of this family. The debt does not allow us to dictate which Weasley child, only that the heir of the Weasley Family is not eligible to satisfy the weremeld. They lack the wherewithal to do anything but endower for servitude. We are offering better than servitude but requiring the obligation be met."

"And it has to be the girl, Father?" Truly, it made no difference to Draco, but if they needed manual labour about the manor, then surely one of the boys would be a better fit. "Would not one of the boys do, given the issue of serving?"

"Would you like a competitor to the inheritance of this family?" Draco paled at the thought. He had assumed the transfer would be of literal service, much like that of a house-elf, not as a member with rights in the Family. "All of the boys are older than you, Draco. I will

do whatever is necessary to ensure that only you inherit the Malfoy estates.”

Draco was only too happy to return to the idea of securing the girl. He agreed with his father; any steps necessary would be taken so that no usurper came between him and his destiny. “So you want me to talk to Ginevra, in private, and explain the Debt Laws. Then I am to hint at what would happen if her parents picked one of her brothers, but that if she were to volunteer, we would swear an oath to her living in comfort and security?”

“After the various Family Bonding rituals performed on her first day with us are complete, yes. You must also make clear that as a member of this Family, her capacity to be an asset mandates she retain her virginal state. If that is lost, any oath ensuring her comfort and safety would be broken.”

“Is it, err, truly necessary for me to explain that, Father?” Draco knew his face was flushed with blood, but the idea of talking to a girl about her status was very disconcerting.

“Draco, put aside your childish views. This is a critical thing to remember for your own future. Powerful magic may be put in place when male or female virgins are involved. Do not cast aside such value in your adolescent awkwardness. We do not know what morals she was taught in that blood-traitor household, so we cannot assume she will act as a proper pure-blood witch should. It must be explicit so that she does not misunderstand.”

“Yes, Father,” Draco said as contritely as he could. “I’m sorry, Father.” He was unsure how he could find a way to broach the topic and not receive a slap, let alone worse, but he supposed he might discuss it with his mother. She would be informed of these plans regardless, and her insight into how to handle the topic could be quite useful.

“While I have always considered the Weasley family to be inferior due to their lack of blood ambition, if the girl were raised with us, it is hard to tell what might change. Perhaps the two of you would find a

mutual attraction as you age. If her inner nature showed promise after several years, I would not necessarily be against a pairing of the heart. You may intimate this possibility as well, if you think it appropriate.”

Draco thought any attraction between a blood-traitor child and himself was unlikely, let alone from almost peasant stock for pure-bloods. But if his father was willing to entertain such ideas about the girl, then there must be some value involved beyond Draco’s knowledge. That suggested he should not reject anything until everything became clearer. “And your demand of her silence or else no security will be offered?”

“Think of her parents, Draco. They are not without connections. Should our plan be revealed, you can be assured that some means to block the transfer would be found. Once we file the petition, however, it will be too late to block. There is no need to rush, however. You have some few years to secure her cooperation, even her interest. It will be within her power to persuade her parents to choose her, not one of her brothers. Given the proper assurances, I believe they would come to see the logic of her argument.”

“I see.” And to a large extent, he did understand more of the picture. What he still did not understand was the real reason for the entire exchange.

“Your job, Draco, is to train her in preparation for that future argument with her family. We are offering to treat her almost like a queen for the rest of her life, and all for ensuring that one of her brothers does not suffer a most painful and protracted death in her place. For now, you must plant the seed, see to her silence, and be sure she understands the limits of her freedom while she considers her choices.”

Draco understood that his freedom to inquire had expired. His father would move on to other things now, so Draco bowed his submission to the plan and quietly left the study. As he headed toward the suite his mother would most likely be resting in, he tried to grasp the pieces that were in play. What was it about the Weasley girl that made her of

such sudden importance? Why would his father go to such lengths and risks to bond her into the Malfoy line? Was he being told the truth or being carefully groomed to deliver a false message? And yet, if oaths were involved, how false could the message truly be? Ultimately, he was a Malfoy and would some day be The Malfoy. Family came first, and eventually he would learn why this manoeuvring was necessary. Until then, he would obey and continue to learn from his father.

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Wed, 20 Sep 1995

Remus shifted slightly at the question, brushing knees with the questioner, unsure exactly how to answer what would at best be a very personal yet complicated issue. More importantly, he was not sure precisely what right he had to answer the question at all. With a sigh, he decided the best tactic for the moment would be to provide sufficient contextual information that it might help guide and refine the thoughts behind the query.

“To be fair, Ginny,” Remus said as gently as he could, “I’m not sure even Harry truly knows why he agreed to train you. Are you perhaps aware of the idea that surprise limits choice?”

Ginny’s appearance, in Remus’ view, was one he had seen several times on Harry through the years. A mixture of struggle for understanding, fear, anger, and a desperate desire for balance in a world that had abruptly removed it were all etched into the shadows of her eyes, the furrows on her brow, and her increasingly dishevelled appearance. That she was sitting so close to him tonight was either a subconscious reflection of her insecurity or a direct sign of her fatigue.

“You mean that if someone surprises you, that you don’t have time to think about alternatives? You sort of just react?”

“Yes,” Remus agreed. “That’s an accurate, if simple, answer. It’s a principle that applies to duels, wars between nations, and even conflict among friends. The surprised side has fewer options than the



attacking side, and it's only with time and thought that the imbalance can be redressed. But for your question, I would suggest that, in some ways, Harry may have simply yielded to the moment."

Ginny frowned further at that answer as she stared around the living room of the Shrieking Shack. Remus tried to follow her gaze, knowing the dichotomy of a ramshackle exterior compared to the somewhat plush, refined interior had to be a source of curiosity for her. They had been renovating the interior off and on for years, preparing for contingencies. So far in her visits, she had avoided asking, but he was uncertain that her resistance would continue much longer. The Shack was still a work in progress, in many respects, but it was home enough for the people who spent time there.

After a long moment, during which the furrow between her brows became even more pronounced, she turned back to him and almost palpably burned a hole in his head with her stare. "But I asked him several times, so there couldn't have been much surprise at the question when he actually did agree."

"True, but to my mind, the surprise is that he didn't refuse you outright." When she appeared to be puzzled at his answer, Remus surmised that Harry had been his usual forthcoming self. "He's told other people no to the same request before, always on the first asking. The two that I know of who asked were too afraid to ask a second time." Of course, there were good reasons for Harry's answer, but that was a different topic.

She remained silent for a while, though her gaze lessened in intensity to a passive unrest. Eventually she looked away from the boards covering the outside of the windows, charmed to be translucent from the inside, and back at him again. That was when he could tell the evasion of his earlier answer had failed. "You said 'some ways' . . . so how am I different, then?"

Picking absently at a piece of lint on the knee of his brown trousers, he noted the similarity in their clothing. Both were wearing serviceable garments, yet there was the tell-tale sign of heavy use indicative of rough living or weak finances. They rarely were in close enough proximity that such little details were made apparent, and he

was reminded again of how the exterior could hide what the interior could not.

Remus tried to think of a way to redirect her query along one of the right paths. Nothing was ever simple with Harry, but giving her an obvious answer would hopefully avoid showing his unwillingness to explore the other answers. "Let me explain that with a tangent, if you will. How many of the so-called pure-blood families were firmly opposed to Voldemort's cause in the last war?"

"A dozen or so, I'd guess."

Remus smiled briefly, her answer amusing for reasons she probably would not appreciate. "Yes, well, let's assume that's a correct answer. Do you think that Harry is unaware of the names of those families?"

Ginny shrugged slightly. "I hadn't thought of it. I don't know all of them, so I wouldn't think he would know all of them, but . . . from what I understand of him, he probably knows the majority."

"Fair enough. Now how many of those blood-traitors, as they were labelled, were also friendly with Muggles?"

Ginny paused, and Remus could tell she was doubtful of the answer or what might come of it. "I don't know. I'd like to believe all of them are."

Remus shook his head briefly, thinking that life was seldom so simple as she assumed it was. "Sadly, it wasn't all of them. That fact might reduce the list of names he could want to be particularly familiar with. Now, to start bringing it back to your question, do you know what the Death Eaters did to pure-blood or half-blood wizards or witches who married Muggles?"

"Err, no." She hesitated for a heartbeat before she said much more quietly, "I'm not sure I want to."

"If you're asking these kinds of questions, Ginny, then you're ready to hear at least part of the answers. I believe your father was called in

to support handling several of these events where Muggles were involved. I'll give you the highlights, but you could ask him for details, I suppose, if you desire. What ultimately happened was largely dependent upon the context when they were discovered."

Remus waited until Ginny nodded for him to continue, as he wanted to be absolutely certain he had her attention. "Any young children that were found living at home were generally tortured with the Cruciatus in front of the parents, then killed. Older children were tortured but usually left alive. The magical spouse was always tortured, while their Muggle counterpart was usually destroyed. That almost goes without saying, doesn't it?" It would be hard enough to talk about with his first-hand memories of witnessing events; he was not about to willingly repeat this if she were meandering mentally.

Ginny nodded slowly, and Remus could tell that the answer was far from surprising. He doubted that anyone who knew even the barest of rumours would be surprised by the routine of torture and death. His problem would be avoiding the memories this discussion would stir up. He needed to keep his mind tightly leashed to the facts alone.

"The more haunting events that I know of had to do with pregnant women, however. That displeased Voldemort's followers very, very much. They wanted to ensure that the magical blood-lines remained as pure as possible. A witch pregnant from a Muggle would be given a forced magical abortion on the spot – after the spouse had been killed, of course. In and of itself, that is supposed to be a very painful process physically, let alone emotionally. Then a round of Cruciatus torture would follow the abortion. It was meant to be an abject lesson in the proper choice of a mate, you see, but it left the witch 'reproductively useful' to their cause."

Watching Ginny, he could tell that the idea was not beyond the realm of her acceptance, though her slightly widened eyes told him that she had not previously heard of such details. Remus waited for Ginny to nod again, striving for the steady breathing techniques that Master Gata had shared previously with all of them. Centring his breathing let him keep a firmer control over his own mental images.

“The worst were the pregnant Muggles, however. They all received the same fate. It was supposed to be symbolic of the Death Eaters’ mission to stamp out impurities, the ultimate punishment for non-compliance with their demands. As the wizard was forced to watch, the Death Eaters would hang the woman from a tree, usually with an improperly placed noose that would choke but not snap the neck. With her secured and slowly suffocating, they would then use a knife to carve the foetus from her body. As the poor woman suffered this double assault, they would brutally murder the foetus. Sometimes they would stay to watch the woman, so they could wager on what would kill the woman first – either asphyxiation or bleeding to death.”

From her complexion, it was clear that Ginny was completely horrified by what Remus had just told her. She was not reacting physically beyond her face’s ghastly pallor, but her eyes said everything. His own mind flashed half-remembered details at him, and his own stomach roiled at the raw cruelty that had been so common at that time. Partially formed fingers flailing. Blood everywhere. Emotionally crushed fathers, shattered dreams, eternal nightmares.

“You can understand why so many people went into hiding and would do anything to avoid being caught. Harry’s own parents barely evaded capture twice while Lily was pregnant. Harry knows all of this, of course, in quite a bit more detail than I’ve described. Perhaps you’re not old enough right now for these particular issues to directly impact you, but you’re also on the cusp of the ten-year span during which most magical humans get married. On top of that, you’re from a family that is well known to have opposed Voldemort’s views, while being solicitous and encouraging of Muggles to the point that your father passed legislation protecting them.”

Ginny was slowly shaking her head side to side, and Remus could tell she was overwhelmed with sympathetic feelings when her hands clutched at her stomach. For his part, he tried to keep the visions at bay, concentrating solely on her trembling hands. The smell of it all had been overpowering, and the aftermath of cleaning and Obliviating was nothing short of hell on earth. Repeated exposure left him feeling faintly sclerotic, that such things simply were and dwelling therein pointless.

“And now . . . well, now you know that Voldemort is back, despite what anyone else may claim. And Harry is very much aware of everything I’ve just told you. But to make this fully relate to the question you asked me, Ginny, let me ask you one final question. Do you know how many years Voldemort’s first war spanned?”

Different faces flickered through his mind as he recalled the scenes he had witnessed. And he had not even begun to scratch the surface of what they did to random Muggles for ‘fun’ and sport, ones that had no knowledge of magic at all. The werewolves made magical abortion look like a clean, gentle, safe medical procedure.

Remus conjured a basin on the floor just in time as Ginny became ill. He was hard pressed not to join her.

oOo oOo

Sun, 24 Sep 1995

Dear Howler,

Your dulcet missive really made everyone happy. In fact, were your words any more endearing, I fear we would all need new teeth. Delivered in person, I’m quite certain we would instead need new ears in lieu of teeth.

The Librarian’s comments aren’t exactly surprising, now are they? It’s a positive sign that at least you’re going to start learning from him. I was wondering if that was ever going to happen. To try to answer some of your queries:

Handy hasn’t been heard from in a while. We suspect he’s working with his clients, currently relocated to sunny Oz. I hope the new residents find it as pleasurable as I did.

Eagle was happy for the letter but has been putting in longer hours. He won’t have a chance to write back until this eve. The man’s about to collapse, but he won’t hear a word about it from us. But he also

said he'd see what he could worm out of Handy when the bat shows up again.

Moony said he'd talk to Strawberry about her little skill. He suggested that you might want to distract her with something to see if it helps her any. He's said that he's becoming a bit worried about her. Regardless, you seem to spend an awful lot of time with this one. Aren't you going to bring her home so we can meet her properly?

Moony also wants me to remind you that McLaggen is still out there, which is his usual subtle hint. Speaking of Moony and subtle, we need to come up with a better name for your buddy, kiddo. If it were up to him, we'd all be named after a fruit. If it were based on hair colour, you'd be Yucky Old Banana, or Yob for short.

Speaking further of cranky old Moony, I can't say that he has been gloating or particularly smug lately. From the inquiry, is it safe to assume you've been pranked? If so, I expect to hear the details soon. Related, your package will arrive this evening. You know the drill.

I found a lovely curse in my family's private library. It basically melts your eyeballs, and it seems to go through any of the first-level shields. Only the high-level barriers will stop it. Quite the nasty bit of work, that one. Think we ought to try it out on old man Riddle? When I can figure out how to get the book past the wards on the house, I'll send it to you. In the meantime, it's tethered to the Grim Den. One of these days we're going to have to burn that place down.

Keep looking up,

Padfoot

23-Sep

Harry chuckled to himself as he finished Sirius' latest missive. It was not the same as talking in person, but it was a good bit better than the prior week's avoidance. Reading between the lines, Sirius was still dodging the root cause of isolation in some respects, but enough hints had previously been conveyed to paint the basic picture. After a

hard morning workout, solo for once, Harry was feeling a bit more of his normal self. It appeared that Sirius was in a similar mood.

His godfather's more subtle digs regarding casual pleasantries and name-calling were par for the course. The ritualistic exchange of insults and sarcasm was one of the cornerstones in their relationship. Being on the run from inane legal authorities or psychotic sociopaths created a natural bridge, which was further enhanced through mutual treaties to torment all comers. The idea that Ginny should be properly indoctrinated into the family mayhem, thus earning a proper name for herself, however, was one that would require some negotiation.

True, she was a friend of sorts, though more by force than choice at the moment. She had a personality that was not quite willing to be labelled or categorised, but that was all right by his view. Very few people he remained friends with could be categorised at all, or if they were, their labels kept shifting. Tonks was the perfect example, and in some ways, Harry could see Ginny becoming as close a friend as Tonks. The problem with that line of thinking, of course, was that time and circumstances were not well-suited to see that outcome as plausible. Trust was a dicey state to assume, and building plans or agendas based on assumptions was tantamount to stabbing yourself in the back – or at least, the latter was quicker and more certain to heal.

Regardless, the suggestion of a distraction for her – ignoring the other barbs, at least – was worth consideration. While Ginny seemed to be in a mental holding pattern, it was less than the progress that was needed. He would not, by any means, hold her to a standard that was unattainable. The fact that she was functional in the main was impressive, but her zeal and vigour still remained a thing of the past. Perhaps a distraction would be sufficient to free her from the burden long enough that she could remember what it was to be normal. If that could be attained a few times, she might begin to self-correct and move past the shadows. Then again, given how well his handling of Ron's arachnophobia had gone, perhaps she would just as easily wind up catatonic or begging for mental scrubbing.

What Harry needed was an expert on Ginny to discuss the idea with, or rather someone he could extract ideas from as to what would be

most useful as a distraction. The best source was always the definitive one, and for a human, that meant engaging the target. With the other boys still in the facilities getting ready for the day, the odds were fair that he could find Ginny either in the common room or soon appearing there. Securing his possessions again, Harry climbed down to the commons but failed to see any redheads.

“D’you know where Ginny is?” Harry asked a girl sitting by the fire. He was unsure of her name but thought it might be Romilda-something.

The girl in question looked up at him with wide eyes and crouched back into her seat as far as she could go. She shook her head briefly, before pointing one finger at the girls’ dormitory.

“Still sleeping, then?” Harry tried again, doing his best to project the image of an innocent mouse.

“Y-y-yes,” the girl replied, clearly uncomfortable at Harry’s proximity.

“Right, thanks,” Harry said by way of reply. He moved across to the other side of the common room and the second fireplace, dropping into a seat. As time ticked by and people went past his seat, Ginny still failed to materialise. He did receive several glares from Hermione, though she said nothing beyond a muttered deprecation or two before she left. It was after Ron trooped through several moments later that Harry realised he was missing an opportunity to get ideas by focusing on just one candidate, no matter how definitive she might be on the issue.

Harry jumped to his feet and followed the path out the portrait and toward the Great Hall. He could hear a faint echo of footsteps, but he could not see anyone around. After a quick jog on the main thoroughfare, Harry spotted Ron Weasley walking by himself in the corridor, most likely en route to breakfast. Deciding to throw caution to the wind, Harry surveyed the hallway closely, ensuring their relative solitude. With the coast clear, he jogged the final distance to catch up to the redhead.



“Hey, Ron,” Harry said as he fell into step with him. “Wait up a moment, please.”

Ron stopped and regarded Harry warily. He remained silent just long enough to check the corridor for himself before turning back to him. “Hermione doesn’t want me talking solo with you. Make it quick, eh?”

“Right,” Harry said. He opted not to mention that Hermione had already preceded her boyfriend. “I, err, need to apologise. You asked me to help you a bit, and my idea didn’t work so well.”

“Yeah, I heard about that.” Ron levelled a moderate frown at Harry for a very long moment. “The thing is, I don’t remember it.”

“I’m still sorry for it.”

“Noted, Potter,” Ron said sharply. “Is that all, then?”

Harry could not particularly blame Ron for being short with him and rather thought he was being a good sport about it, all things considered. “Actually, there is one other thing. Remember how you asked me to fix things with Ginny? Well, I need a bit of help with that. I need to know what makes her happiest.”

Ron snorted briefly before he turned to scan the corridor again. “Happiest? How should I know? Maybe it’s knitting a tea cosy or scarves or something.”

The redhead’s sarcasm was quite clear, though Harry ignored it. He already expected to have tense relations with any of Ron’s close friends, given the required Obliviate. “Be real, Ron. What makes her happy?”

“Well, as long as it’s not happiest.” Ron sighed and scrubbed one fist through his hair and around his chin briefly. “You’re an odd one, Potter. Let me think. Quidditch, obviously. Flying in general, I’d say. Chocolates during the hols, so there’s one. Causing mischief. Kittens. That sort of thing.”

Harry paused to consider the stated items. Aside from the Quidditch bit, it sounded like Ginny was much like many other girls, should Tonks be believed. The bit about mischief could go either way, but the theme was there. “Right, chocolate and brooms. Just what I needed to know.”

Ron eyed him closely before he barked out, “You’re not going to start buying her chocolate brooms, are you?”

The question surprised Harry. Did they make some kind of little chocolate broom that swept through the sky? It might be like the Chocolate Frogs that had only one good jump in them – perhaps they had one good aerial lap. “Why? Do they make them?”

“You keep telling us you’re not together, but then you’re asking about this stuff,” Ron muttered. “How are we supposed to know why you’re asking? But yeah, most teams sell Chocolate Brooms at games. Might be able to order some via owl if you tried.”

Harry nodded briefly and considered that a rather obvious venue for selling things to broom-nuts and player fans. “Well, if they don’t make you fly, I suspect I’ll stick with the ordinary stuff.”

Ron shrugged his indifference to the notion before again checking the hall. “Right. Anything else, then?”

Harry gave Ron a half-smile before replying. “Nah. Thanks for helping, reluctantly or otherwise.”

Harry turned and started to head back to the Gryffindor common room to wait for Ginny, but Ron’s voice stopped him. “Harry?”

“Weasley?”

“Just don’t make it worse.” There was a hint of a plea in the redhead’s voice. “You didn’t mean to with me, but you did.”

Harry paused to consider the request. Had it been someone else, he would probably run his mouth off and cause a scene. Considering the

source of the comment, he tried to think of some way to affirm his recognition of the serious issue while also bridging the gap a bit. “Right,” he offered finally. “No love potions, then?”

Ron’s eyes shot wide for a moment before a grimace settled over his features. “I didn’t hear that, Potter.”

Harry smirked briefly before returning to the common room. Things would still be tense and strained with Ron, but at least a small bridge had been constructed. He had apologised, and Ron had apparently understood the real reason for Harry’s questions about Ginny. Ron’s friends and girlfriend would probably still be hostile, but Harry thought Ron would be okay with him – eventually. Right now, however, he had an idea for a distraction and another letter to write. He needed a touch of help arranging a few minor details, and by sheer principle, he was unwilling to let Sirius have the last word on anything. Yob, indeed.

oOo oOo

Harry had spent the better part of the afternoon following Mrs Figg’s cats about the castle, as she had requested. Students were still giving him a bit of space as he passed, but on two occasions they just gave him a terse nod and carried on. It was a small step, perhaps, but his pariah status might be transitioning to just avoidance.

Since he was allowed to use as much magic as he liked in cleaning, everywhere the cats went, a trail of perfectly scoured and highly polished corridors, furniture, and painting frames remained. Harry was too cautious to try using magic on some of the paintings directly, no matter how dark the picture or irritating the commentary. That was one area of magic he had close to zero knowledge of, but he thought it safe enough to ignore as the act of making a painting was far from likely to be a viable battle magic.

Given that he had already cleaned at least fifty percent of the public regions of the castle, he thought it was a fairly simple strategy on Mrs Figg’s part for detention handling. Whether the animals took a random path or not was too hard to guess, but their path served as well as any other arbitrary “go clean there” command. By the time his dues were paid to the rounds of cleaning the next weekend, it was

almost certain the entire castle interior would be gleaming. Should Filch ever return, the poor man might have a dearth of projects for students to not use their magic on. Then again, from the rumours and stories he had heard, it was equally likely the man might deliberately grime a room or twelve just to have something for students to clean.

Since he still had several items of business to conduct as soon as his detention was up, he ignored the mewling of the Kneazles in their quest for things in corners and started his return journey to the Gryffindor area, thankful to be leaving the rather dark and boring dungeons behind. At least on the upper levels there were windows, while in the two dungeon levels the best you could hope for was an impressive spider or vindictive painting. Whether that particular subterranean atmosphere was cultivated by the prior head of Slytherin or if it was a much older tradition mattered little to Harry – all he really wanted was to feel the open skies and be outside for a bit. Of course, that had to wait as well, but looking at the world beyond the walls of cold granite was at least a step in the right direction.

The thought of flying jogged loose Ron's commentary from earlier in the day, and Harry had to smirk at his planned "distraction" – assuming the supplies came through that night. As he passed the kitchens en route to the secret of the sleeping dragon elevator, he heard the unmistakable clanking nearby.

"Oh, come on," Harry muttered. "What the hell is this thing's problem?"

Stepping to the centre of the corridor, Harry turned to face the approaching armour and waited, right wand in hand. He hardly required any patience, for the same suit of armour he had dealt with repeatedly was already bearing down on him. With a sigh, Harry noted that the thing was carrying a spear this time and was already lowering it as though preparing to charge.

"Look," Harry said while holding up one hand. "What's it going to take to get over this? I've offered to apologise, I've offered to –"

His attempt to negotiate came to an abrupt halt as the spear completed its descent and was levelled more or less at his chest. The armour had yet to slow down, and if he stood his ground, Harry was going to be impaled in short order. Dodging to the side, he let the armour clatter past him, bits of the torchlight shining through the empty interior and giving a surreal halo effect to the seams. It turned with some effort and was obviously preparing to charge again.

“All right, then,” Harry said calmly. “War it is.”

Seven strong cutting curses later, the armour, the spear, and the nearby tapestry were in several pieces. One gauntlet, not buried under other bits of armour, was slowly trying to crawl his way, the fingers scrabbling for purchase on the stone floor.

“Who the bloody hell keeps fixing you, that’s what I’d like to know,” Harry told it as he conjured a giant burlap sack. “I’d like to have a nice, long chat with them.” Of course, with his luck, it was equally likely the armour was enchanted to reassemble itself. “With sharp objects. Or even blunt ones.”

The last encounter had ended with a Permanent Sticking Charm on the ceiling for the pieces. Clearly, that was not going to work to keep the bits separated. His mistake probably lay in the fact that it was a public corridor, and sooner or later somebody was bound to look up. That, of course, made him think of Sirius’ constant lectures on the same topic.

This time, Harry decided, he would exploit how rarely the kitchen hallway was visited by any living entity with normal locomotive function. Levitating the bag of pieces, which were already starting to clank and squirm on their own, giving an impression of a bag full of metal kittens, he walked to the nearest broom cupboard. A quick visual inspection showed that it was barren of anything except dust and insects, so he patiently re-applied the Permanent Sticking Charm to each piece of armour, attaching it at least a foot away from any other piece. When the whole operation was complete, Harry closed the door, locked it, and then cast an Impervius Charm on it followed by a Notice-Me-Not Charm. The faint lingering image of wriggling

fingers and toes as the door shut would hopefully be the last image he had of that bit of scrap iron.

“Get out of that one, you arse,” Harry told the door as he headed back to the lift. The whole thing was baffling. In a school of children, surely someone at some point had knocked down some armour before. Were they hounded throughout the castle on a witch-hunt, or rather, a wizard-hunt? Efforts at apologies ignored in favour of a spot of blood-letting? Or maybe those rare critical injuries sustained at the school were object lessons from the guardians to the less-than-careful students?

Reaching the sleeping dragon tapestry, Harry tapped the dragon between the eyes while focusing on the number seven and then pushed it aside, stepping into the elevator. One heart-lurching moment later, he stepped out onto the seventh floor and finally completed his trek to the common room.

A few students were scattered about, some doing homework but most socialising from what he could tell. As there was no one he needed to talk to, nor anyone likely to want his company, Harry continued directly to his dormitory, hopeful that his fellow scoundrels would have delivered everything. Neville was on his bed, reading something, when Harry entered.

With a nod, Harry asked, “How’s life today, Neville?”

Neville glanced up, gave him a shrug, and went back to the book. “S’all right, I suppose.” The voice was muffled a bit by the book. “Hermione has the twins and Ron up to something. Might want to watch your back.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry said by way of reply, not really paying full attention. “They can join the queue.” Harry systematically went through the protections on his trunk and transporter box before he cracked the lid and found two small packages. There was no note, but that was not surprising. Everyone was busy with tasks, so witty banter sometimes had to wait.

Tossing both bundles onto his bed, Harry resealed the box and then his trunk, turning all the protections back on. Peeves would be quite pleased with the form of payment, all things considered. Harry chuckled briefly at the thought of what mischief might be coming from an old threat with new toys. Bribery had its place in life, no matter what anyone else said.

“Harry?” Neville’s voice surprised him, so he turned and saw his friend regarding him seriously, the book cast aside.

“Yes?”

“Do you really think you need all those protections on your trunk?”

Harry supposed it was a fair question, after a fashion, but it was hard to answer in an honest manner, since it would almost beg the question why. There were far too many things in his trunk that he would never admit to having, no matter who asked, let alone the things he might admit to but only under direct orders from someone like Vencil. The simplest answer would perhaps be to allude to ideas that might be possible, yet support the right conclusion.

“Sort of, I suppose. Do you know what a gun is, Neville?”

Neville nodded briefly. “Sure, I’ve heard of them. Never seen one, though.”

“Okay,” Harry said after a moment. “Do you know how dangerous they are?”

“A little bit, I think,” Neville replied slowly. “Wars and such, right?”

“Among other uses, yes. In the Muggle world, when you have something that’s so potentially dangerous if used incorrectly, you need to keep it secured – from thieves, yes, but also from innocents like kids. That way they don’t hurt themselves or others. It’s a law, really.”

“You have a gun, then?”

Harry shook his head. "Not in there, no. But I have other things just as dangerous, and while I trust you not to rummage, I can't honestly say the same for everyone else in the castle – especially the first years and so on."

"So it's less about trusting us and more about not taking chances?"

"Exactly," Harry agreed. Neville came to the right conclusion, with the right understanding, and nothing sensitive had been given away. "Of course I have ordinary stuff too, like you've seen – clothes, books, things I've collected over the years. But it's easier to lock down the whole trunk than it is to protect each item."

"Hmmm." Neville looked thoughtful for a moment before he grinned slowly. "I guessed as much, and I warned Hermione. She tried to see if she could figure out what you used to protect it and got surprised for her efforts."

Harry groaned silently, thinking it was one more straw on that camel's back, regardless of whether this one was properly earned or not. "How bad was it?"

"Madam Pomfrey said she could straighten it out, but we didn't see her again until lunch. I thought the glowing archery target centred on her nose was pretty funny, but she didn't."

Harry exhaled slowly, thankful she had only been thwarted at the first layer. "Do me a favour, will you? Next time you talk to her, tell her I asked you to tell her this: the protections on my things can cause serious, even fatal, injuries if you're not authorised. They're benign until you try to get around them, but the repercussions are increasingly dire as more attempts are made. Will you tell her that for me?"

Neville's smile faded a bit, but he nodded anyway. "Do you really need that stuff here if it's so dangerous you can kill people over it?"



Harry shrugged for a moment, thinking that it was turning back around to territory he was unwilling to explain. "Let me put it this way. People have already died over it, and I'm not going to leave it somewhere I don't have convenient access to. Nor am I going to leave it unprotected. Even Gringotts and Azkaban can be breached, if you really want to, so where is it safer than here?"

Neville was silent for a while before he nodded slowly. "I trust you, Harry. If you think this is the best place for it, and we're not at risk over it, then all right. I'll tell the others to avoid your trunk."

The words were unexpected and all the richer for it. Again Harry felt that there were ties he had with Neville that were stronger than with anyone else in the castle, whether it be by design or coincidence mattered not. But the simple, painfully honest utterance of truth and trust was better than anything he could think of at the moment. At least one person in this castle understood part of his life, and that was a strange sort of relief.

"Thanks, Neville. That . . . well, it means a lot to me."

Neville gave him a half-smile, and Harry could tell the sentiment was received properly. "You already explained things to me, remember? You should do that with the others, you know."

Harry snorted at the idea. "Yeah, sure. They're still focused on how dangerous or Dark I must be."

"You don't give them anything else to see, do you?" Neville countered. "You're bored in class, you disappear all the time, and only rumour follows you around. Everyone's looking sideways at Ginny now, too, and they wonder what you're doing that makes her so listless."

"Oh, come on, Neville, that's not my fault. I didn't do anything to her."

Neville held up both hands in silent supplication. “I know that, but they don’t know that. They just see what anyone can see, so what other conclusion can they make? Like I said, you don’t help matters.”

“They’re sheep!” Harry all but shouted, slumping onto his bed beside the shrunken packages. “They believe whatever the Ministry or the Prophet spouts, which is pure shit in the first place. If I explained myself today, tomorrow some jackass would say something contrary, and then it’s right back to where we started. It’s not worth the effort.”

Neville remained quiet but fiddled with the book he had been reading. Harry could see the title, No Analogue Ecosystems, and was surprised by how non-magical the entire thing looked. When Neville spoke again, it brought Harry’s attention back to the moment.

“That’s true to a point, Harry. But if you showed by act that things aren’t like they’re being told, it might help them to stop being sheep, as you put it.”

It was an idea that Remus had advocated some time prior to his arrival at Hogwarts, but Harry was in firm agreement with Sirius – any society that would treat its own citizens the way Magical Britain did would never believe the truth when delusions and lies were set by indoctrination.

“Cho doesn’t think badly of you,” Neville said after the silence had stretched out. “She said that you were a bit scary but seemed to be trying to do the right thing.”

Harry could only raise one eyebrow in surprise, Ginny’s words coming back to him regarding the budding romance between Neville and the Asian girl. “Oh?”

Neville shrugged again before he started pushing his book around a bit more. “Said you were cute, too, when you weren’t scary.”

“What?!”

Neville's half-smile was back, and Harry was having a hard time telling whether his friend was twisting his tail or being honest.

"Neville, I thought that the two of you were, err, together or somewhat."

Neville sighed deeply before he flopped backwards on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Harry had the impression that he had just put his foot on some sort of emotional landmine.

"Yeah, maybe. I can't really tell." Neville was quiet again, so Harry let him have his space to articulate whatever was on his mind. "We've, uh, kissed once, but mostly she's still really torn up about Cedric, you know? I don't know if she likes me for me, or if I'm just . . . the rebound, I think that's what Ginny called it. I've found that I genuinely like her, though, and don't know what to do. I mean, if I get attached and she's just unintentionally using me, then I'll be a mess. But if she really wants to be with me and I put her off, maybe she'll give up and move on."

Harry thought about the problem and then thought of Remus. Perhaps sharing a bit of real history would help give Neville an example that things can work, though there was little enough certainty in any relationship.

"An older friend of mine," Harry offered, "a very, very close friend . . . he was seriously in love with a woman. He thought she was everything, and, after a time, he wanted to get engaged. He kept some big secrets from her, since she was a Muggle, and decided to come clean with her before he asked her to marry him. He'd been agonising over it for a while, but when he finally decided, well . . . it was kind of full-steam ahead. But when he talked to her that night, she told him she wanted to see other people. Some of her friends told her she already acted like a married lady with him, and she decided she 'wanted no regrets' and wanted to spend some time apart 'for a while' so they could 'spend more time with other people' and then decide how they felt with some distance."

Neville sat up and just stared at Harry, his face creased in consternation. "That's stupid."

"Yeah, well, you and I might think so, but everyone's entitled to their own opinion, you know?"

"Maybe. Doesn't make it meaningful, though."

Harry laughed hard for a brief moment, surprised at Neville's clever word choice. "And this from the guy that wants me to suck up to the sheep?"

Neville shrugged faintly. "I thought it might make your life easier, not theirs."

"Message delivered, Neville. I'll think about it. Anyway, back to the story, my friend sort of crashed and burned really hard. He kept seeing her with a different guy on her arm, since they lived in the same town and frequented the same places. I guess you'd say he became misogynistic when dating and what not, but it never became generalised because he still had trustworthy and solid female friends. But one of those friends really wanted to be with him, so she did the right thing. She was there for him, helped him pick up the pieces, and showed him he could trust someone again. I kind of suspect they had a few one-night stands before they wound up together, but now they're very happy and probably will get married. She might have to do the asking, though."

Neville stared at the floor for a while before he flopped back onto the bed again. "So I can see what you're saying, Harry, but where does this leave me?"

"I don't know, Neville," Harry said after a moment to ponder the issue. "I think I'd say it this way. I believe in you, and I believe you'll do the right thing. You won't take advantage of her, but you don't have to refuse her, either. Based on my other friend, I'd say that as long as you go slow and you're sure she's with you for the right reasons at any moment, then see if you can make it work. If things are off kilter, then just wait and hope for the best."

“Wow, that almost makes you sound mature,” Neville said with a laugh. “Aren’t you the guy that confessed to being clueless?”

“I did, and I am,” Harry agreed with a chuckle. “Here’s a simpler way of looking at it. Think of what I’d do during a normal encounter. Then do the exact opposite. It’s bound to be safer and have a happier ending.”

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Mon, 25 Sep 1995

The early morning hours – particularly the very early morning hours – were clearly not her most favoured. Given that Harry had been forcing her to keep an early morning schedule for only a little while, it was less than surprising that she had yet to fully adjust to it. Then again, this morning was even earlier than normal, and Harry would prefer to get up much later than five o’clock as well.

“C’mon, Ginny. You keep complaining about training in the castle, so we’re going out.”

“Out?” She cracked a massive yawn that made Harry’s own jaw ache in sympathy. “It’s not even dawn. And it’s bloody cold out there.”

Harry led the way through the portrait hole, ignoring the grunts and snores from the Fat Lady. “Do you treat all your dates with such enthusiasm?”

Ginny sounded just like the Fat Lady with her utterances as they made it to the first staircase down. “I expect more on a date than just a night sky.”

“Would you rather run around outside or on the stairs?” Harry tried to put on his best smile, but the scowl he was rewarded with showed the futility of it.

“Don’t pretend like you’re doing me a favour, here, Harry,” she retorted. “No one would believe you.”

“Favours?” Harry’s eyebrows shot up and the mere thought of it. “Now, Ginny, when have you ever seen me do a favour for anyone?”

Ginny was silent all the way to the doors exiting the castle before she spoke up. “Twice.”

“What?” Harry tried to think of what she could possibly be considering as a favour, and he realised that almost none of his acts would be seen as favours to the students in the castle, regardless of whether they actually were. Maybe Neville had a point after all. “Twice? No way.”

As they stepped outside, Ginny shuddered briefly and drew her scarf more firmly around her neck. “Harry, it’s freezing out here. Where are we going?”

“That way,” Harry offered with a negligent wave toward the depths of the night as he closed the door with his other hand. Since the new moon was only two days prior, pitch-black was an appropriate description away from the torches outside the castle, given the usual highland cloud cover blocking the Milky Way or any false dawn radiance. “Now what do you mean, ‘twice’?”

Ginny’s sigh easily carried over the slight wind. “Twice, Harry, as in, two times have I seen you do something as a favour. You tried to help Ron with his arachnophobia.”

Harry almost stopped in surprise but managed to catch himself and keep pace as they headed down the path toward the lake. It was a surprising connection to him, for he doubted any rational person would use that incident as an example of a favour. He certainly did not think of it as a favour, and it was unlikely Ron did either. “Do you think Ron considers that a favour?”

“It’s not the results in this case, Harry, it’s the intention.”

Harry had to laugh at that logic, even if the event was somewhat in the direction of a favour – with that qualifier. “D’you know the meaning of the word ‘sophistry’ by any chance?”

Ginny’s own chuckle came back to him. “Yes, and it doesn’t apply. The second time, well, you helped me . . . rest . . . last week.”

Harry thought about her second choice as they reached the lake. In the dark, he was unable to make out her face to guess at her mood, but he interpreted the hesitation and softness of her words as a continuing sign that she was still uncomfortable with the recent developments in her life. As they reached the edge of the lake, he almost immediately guided her to a tangential path that led up into the hills around the castle. Having previously left small disillusioned pebbles on the path which practically glowed in his aura vision, he knew he could guide them both to their destination without light, and the spells would fade in another day or two.

When the incline began to pitch a bit sharper, and the path began weaving toward the side of the first small mountain, Harry cast a faint Lumos Charm to ensure they would not stumble on the walk. With the increased effort required to go up and around the hill, Harry decided to return to the banter. The mission of the morning was to provide a distraction, after all, and not to dwell on reality. Loading as much humour as he could into his tone, he asked, “Are you sure that was a favour?”

Ginny’s breathing was showing the effect of walking briskly uphill, but she still managed to laugh after a moment. “Why? Worried about people looking at you as though you might have a heart after all?”

“Who said such a foul thing?”

Ginny’s chuckle said as much as her words. “I did.”

“I’m wounded,” Harry moaned. Really, Harry thought, it was one thing to divert someone from their troubles, but to be accused of such things was uncalled for. He felt his entire image of indifference was at

stake. "You should have realised I don't have one. I have a lump of tar."

"Funny boy, Potter."

Harry could almost hear her smile, which was the point of it all. "I just call it like it is, Weasley."

They continued on in silence, side by side, as Harry kept up the walking tempo. Normally, he would have met her a bit before breakfast to do some light training and discussion of magic, but today was starting much earlier. He could have taken a shortcut and flown them to their destination, but the walk of some thirty minutes would wake them up fully and get their bodies warm. They would need both aspects, too.

"While we're being candid, then," Ginny's voice interrupted his musings, "I've wanted to ask you a few questions for a while. It never seems like the right time, though, so I'm just going to ask as I'm pretty sure we're alone out here."

"All right," Harry agreed as they started back down, edging around the back of the small mountain they had just skirted. "Fire away then."

The length of the pause before she spoke again was odd until her words registered. "How do you live with the things you've done?"

Harry kept his eyes on the path in front of them and avoided looking over at her. Surely she was not asking what he thought she was. "Errr... Given the lack of context, d'you mind elaborating?"

"Harry," she offered very slowly, "you've really caused a lot of pain to people. And you've, well . . ." The silence stretched out before she finished in a rush, "you've killed people. How are you . . . not bothered by that?"

She was asking what he feared she was. Harry briefly recalled a very similar conversation in reverse, when he was asking Master Gata whether the man had ever taken another person's life. It had felt



different, though, because Harry had killed someone – his own adoptive mother – before that conversation took place. At the time, he had been struggling to face the fear that he would hurt someone like that again. Learning martial arts had proven to be a boon in many respects, but his initial qualms and the long discussions with Master Gata had helped him find his own sense of understanding with respect to bushido. It was clearly not for everyone, but for those that either chose to be a warrior or were forced into it, he could not see any other way to keep your sanity than to find that balance with something beyond the ordinary. Of course, that ignored the open questions of his personal sanity and stability.

In this, however, the tables were turned in one sense – she was asking him about the taking of life without having done so herself, as far as he knew – and yet, he did not know the why of her question. Was part of her problem with the Malfoy family rooted in violence already past? Or was it the future she was struggling to come to terms with? Or was it simply morbid curiosity, a desire to know what it was like to feel someone die? He might be able to find a way to discuss it if it was one of the first two, but any other pretext would be . . . wrong, somehow, or demeaning.

“Look, Ginny,” Harry finally offered, “I like you well enough . . . but that’s a very personal question. You know that.”

“Yeah,” her voice was faint, as though she had drawn in on herself. “I know. And I don’t like asking, but . . . that’s partly why I haven’t asked before.”

Her answer provided no hints as to her motivations, but her understanding the vague inappropriateness of the query suggested it was more than just idle curiosity at work. Perhaps, he thought, the best answer was to counter with an obvious target. “D’you think I enjoy doing . . . those things?”

“I really don’t know, Harry.”

They trudged on in silence, and he found himself annoyed with her. She was asking an intensely personal question, while she continued

to hold herself aloof from explaining her own issues. She was asking for more than he was already giving without any semblance of exchange.

Before his irritation could grow into a sharp retort, her voice gave him pause. "That's why I'm asking, Harry. It doesn't appear to bother you. But no, I don't think you enjoy it. Yet at the same time, you do like practicing it . . . teaching it . . . so it leaves me . . . wondering."

There was some level of logic there. Harry could admit that much, even though he thought it was rather tenuous. It felt like she was being honest, or as honest as she could be. "Do you think I started any of this? The fighting, the killing?"

"No, of course not." Her tone was firm and decisive, the words almost sharp. "But you don't walk away from it, either."

Harry guided them onto a connecting trail, this one much more narrow and less even. It would take them further from Hogwarts and wind around the base of a second small mountain, removing them from the ability to even see a glimmer from the castle's torches. His low-powered light spell was the only thing illuminating the area before them as they walked.

As the ground began sloping up again, Harry felt he might have found the right type of answer. "Sometimes, Ginny, you aren't given a choice to walk away."

Ginny exhaled sharply, and he turned enough to see her tossing her head from side to side. "It's just . . ." Her hands waved about for a moment before she jammed them into her trouser pockets. She looked over at him and seemed surprised that he was watching her. Meeting his gaze, she almost challenged him with her words. "Harry, your lack of reaction to what's been done here, at the castle . . . it says you've . . . done that before."

"Done what?" Harry held her gaze, accepting the challenge, and came to a stop. He would ignore the path they were on for the moment, as well as where they were headed. "Killed people?"

She flinched slightly and then nodded. "Yes."

"I have."

She continued to hold his gaze for a long moment, and then she looked down. When she failed to say anything else after a bit, Harry gestured toward the path and resumed walking. She fell in beside him, and he was puzzled about her reaction. Or rather, he was puzzled by her lack of reaction. He was also annoyed with himself for wanting her to have an immediate, clear response. His conversation years before with Master Gata had been drawn out over weeks, and that was after they had been training together for almost a year. How much harder would it be for her to come to grips with the same ideas, given how very different their experiences were? What difference did it make to him whether she understood his actions or not? Harry was unsettled all around, but that could be expected from the topic of discussion before you tossed in the reactions of third parties.

"How do you stand it?" Ginny was speaking quietly again, her voice drained of life. "How does it not bother you?"

"I never said it didn't." He knew his own response was a bit harsh, a little too strong in tone and brusque in enunciation. But he honestly was confused as to whether he was annoyed with her or himself in the greater measure.

"These things you're trying to teach me . . . you know they work." Her words had the ring of conviction, not accusation. That was something, at least, though he was unsure what. "You've used them for it."

"I've used some of them in life-or-death situations, yes. I haven't necessarily used them for what you're thinking of, you know." He probably should have expected this conversation to come up at some point, but hindsight was ever better than foresight. Harry hoped she could see the difference in the two ideas – using techniques to kill, or using them because it was kill-or-be-killed, though it had not always been his life in the most immediate danger.

“And you’re even calm talking about this! Look at me!” Harry did glance at her in the weak reflected light from his wand. “I’m shaking just thinking about it.” He thought she looked about as pale as normal and could not see a literal palsy, but he understood the statement was intended far more emotionally than literally.

“Ginny . . .” Harry let the words and ideas drift away, trying to find his own natural centre and balance. He let the effort of walking carry the preconceived ideas away, so he could just focus on what she was asking and not worry about what it might mean in the broader context. Did she expect to have to use these techniques to such an end? Was she morbidly curious how to live with the results of violent self-defence? Or was there something else he had yet to discover underlying everything? Once he thought he was calm enough, he made no effort to sculpt or censor and only tried to speak honestly and directly. “I don’t know what to tell you. I could answer your question, but . . . it wouldn’t make any sense. It would just be . . . empty words. I have regrets – more than you could ever imagine, I have regrets. I’ve hurt people I love, and I’ve hurt people I hate. But . . . until you’ve walked in my shoes . . . you won’t truly understand an answer that only words convey.”

Maybe she would be annoyed with him for dodging the answer or equivocating behind a perceived excuse, but he really had no idea how to fairly answer the question she was really trying to ask. Until she deeply, profoundly hurt someone else, words would only be an illusion, a sugar coating on reality. If she decided to think him mealy-mouthed because of that, he would accept it and try not to let it bother him.

Her eventual words were blunt yet soft. “I don’t want to walk in your shoes.”

Harry could not help but chuckle with dark humour at the idea. “I fervently hope you never have to.” Taking a deep breath, Harry plunged on, feeling obligated to repeat his prior offer. “Look, if being around me is going to make you this miserable, we’ll stop. I told you before, I’ll find a way to get you out of this mess if you want to. You

don't have to train; you don't have to learn these things. You don't have to be around me."

"That won't work. You and I both know it, Harry. For better or worse, I have to do this."

Her statement brought his mind to a halt, wondering at the word choice. They both knew she had to train? Not strictly true, nor entirely false. She clearly had her own thoughts on the topic, and as already established, she would not be sharing them anytime soon. He doubted, however, that she understood his views fully, if at all. Then again, she had displayed a certain level of acumen regarding people in general, let alone his own mental state, so perhaps she did understand some of his reasons for agreeing to train her in the first place.

With a sigh, Harry nodded slightly. "To be honest, that is one of my regrets. That is, it didn't start out with you having to do any of this, but it does seem to be necessary now."

"You can stop pretending, Harry," Ginny said after the silence had settled again. It was clear she was feeling more open, more playful, to some degree. "You care more than you'll admit."

"Them's fighting words, Weasley."

She really did laugh that time, her voice clear of worry. "You're going to beat me up anyway, Potter. Might as well get in what wounds I can."

"If that's the best you can do, I need to make your lessons longer."

"Ugh," she whined. "Me and my big mouth."

Harry chuckled a bit at her admission. It was rather late to be realising as much, but wisdom learned should always be appreciated. "Big? Not really. Mouthy? Seems like a Weasley trait."

They were finally getting close to their destination, having wound around the base of the second mountain. Harry kept the pace brisk, though, as they still needed to walk down into the small bowl-shaped valley that was surrounded by the hills. The grey light of a true dawn was just becoming strong enough to make out shapes, so they should arrive at their destination at exactly the right moment.

“You’re not really going to make me train more than I am, are you?” Ginny sounded wistful, hopeful even, though her tone made it clear she was unwilling to bet on his response.

Harry let her stew in silence for a bit before answering. “Maybe I will. Maybe I won’t. Depends on how good you are, really.”

Harry did his best not to laugh at her ‘muttered’ threats, clearly just audible enough for him to hear them but soft enough that she could deny the intent of it. Perhaps he ought to deliberately twist her tail a bit less, but the problem was he found it too tempting to wind her up rather than simply sit back and let things be. Her entire personality woke up a bit more when there was something vexing at hand – a challenge, a contest, something that pushed her outside of the everyday boundaries other people accepted. At first, he had pushed her just to see what she would do. Now, he simply liked pushing her. Of course, he was also honest enough with himself to realise that pushing someone’s buttons was not a particularly healthy activity to engage in, more so with a last name such as Weasley. His thoughts came to an end, however, when they reached the bottom of the valley floor.

“We’re here,” he announced while putting away his wand. The dawn was bright enough to make it no longer completely necessary.

Ginny glanced around and then frowned at him. “Harry, it’s barely twilight, and we just climbed around two small mountains. Where are we?”

“Look around,” Harry offered with a shrug. “What do you see?”

“Trees.”

He had to smirk at her tart manner. “Anything else?”

“No. Is this some kind of trick question?”

“Excellent,” Harry replied as he dug around in his trouser pocket. Finding the over-sized coin, he pulled it out and let it rest in his left palm. Then he drew his wand out again. “Ever heard the phrase ‘out of sight, out of mind’?”

“Yeeeeesss . . . “

“That’s what we’re doing. No castles, no students, no reminders. Just us, and as it so happens . . .” Harry tapped the false coin with his wand, and it materialised into a rather large, thin, round box. “As it so happens, we also have two Firebolts.”

“What?!” Ginny’s eyes shot wide, and her eyebrows rocketed into her hairline. “Firebolts?!”

Harry opened the dimensional box and extracted two full-sized Firebolts – his own and Sirius’ – and then set the box on the ground. Holding out his own broom for Ginny, Harry shot her the wolf-grin. “Care to go for a fly?”

Before Harry could blink, the broom was ripped from his hand and Ginny was a fading image on his retina. Glancing up, he saw her shooting into the sky at what appeared to be full acceleration. While the sky had enough light to make out shapes and avoid collisions, it was insufficient for him to see her face clearly. When he heard her let out a whoop of glee, he was content to stand there and let her have the sky to herself for a while. Sirius’ prodding to provide a distraction, coupled with Ron’s input, was apparently a very successful combination if her shouts and laughs were any metric to go by.

After some time watching her fly, Harry put Sirius’ broom away and conjured a chair to sit on. They had almost an hour to burn before they would need to head back, and he still had the backup Plan B shrunken in his pocket – an extravagant variety pack of Honeyduke’s

Most Popular. If Ron was as accurate on the chocolate issue as he was about flying – especially as Ginny went screaming over his head, close enough that he was buffeted by the forced airstream of her passage – then he was sure that this morning would count as a good distraction and not a therapy-inducing one.

When Ginny went streaking by again with another shout of glee, Harry decided that he might as well get comfortable. He put the box of sweets on the ground, then expanded it to full size – all things considered, he might be forced to distract her with chocolate before she would willingly return to the castle. Then he expanded the chair, making it more comfortable and with a high back so he could rest while keeping a loose eye out on the surroundings. While he felt the area was safe, there was no reason to tempt his fickle fate with a free shot.

“That’s three, Harry.”

“What?” Harry had no idea what she was talking about, struggling back into consciousness. He had apparently drifted off sometime while she was doing aerobatics, and as he opened his eyes, she was squatting by his side, calmly eating a bar of chocolate. He was annoyed with himself for falling asleep in an open location, but his sluggish brain was telling him the end result was all right regardless. Her grin was almost intimidating, the way it reshaped her entire face with a possessive glee.

“Three times you’ve done a favour. And for the record, if this is your idea of a date – flying and chocolate – I’ll take back my earlier comments. I’ll do this with you anytime you want.”

“Oh, is that how it is?” Harry asked, his brain functioning at last. He loaded in the sarcasm for his response. “A pretty face, a fast broom, and some congealed sugar-cocoa mixture are all it takes to win your heart?”

“Harry, Harry, Harry . . . I don’t see a pretty face around here.”



Harry groaned theatrically for a moment. "I walked into that one, didn't I?"

She just smiled at him before taking another bite of her chocolate bar. "Maybe," she said after clearly relishing the morsel, "you ought not to try trading insults when you're so sleepy."

"Yeah, maybe," Harry said around a yawn. "Then again, given that you're on the Quidditch team, maybe I should have expected you to go crazy over the broom."

Ginny laughed, and Harry paused to consider the girl in front of him. Her eyes were shining, and her grin was still one shy step from disturbing. Yet there was a sense of life and presence in her that he had never seen before. It was more than when she had been harassing him during his first public days in the castle, and it made her radiant. If what he was seeing was what her brothers had complained about missing, he could understand their perspective more clearly.

"If I thought there was any way I could pinch this from you, Harry, I would," she agreed openly. "As it is, I'll just have to pester you frequently to find out when you can borrow the Firebolt from the owner again. This was fantastic. Thank you."

Harry shrugged, feeling slightly uncomfortable at her effusive pleasure. It had not been his idea in the first place to drag her out for a distraction, nor for the flying or chocolates. "Actually," he offered after thinking about it briefly, "that one is mine. You can borrow it when you like, considering they're verboten inside the castle now. This one has to go back, though."

"What?! I thought you had a Nimbus!"

"Nah," Harry said with a vague wave. "I usually keep it under a glamour to make it look like a decent broom but nothing fantastic. You're seeing it without the charms for the first time."

“Really?” Ginny’s eyebrows shot up even further. “And you’d let me just nick your broom like that?”

Harry shrugged half-heartedly. “I can always find some other way to fly, you know,” he said. “Worst-case, I’ll just use your old broom. I’m not on the team. But you’re a natural, Ginny, and I trust you with my broom.”

“Thanks, Harry,” she said with her smile growing less feral and more open at the same time. “All the same, I wouldn’t feel right about it.”

“That’s up to you, I suppose. I’m just telling you I’m all right with it if you want to – games, stress relief, boredom, whatever.”

In what appeared to be an impulsive move, Ginny’s hand shot out and squeezed his own for a moment. She stopped there and looked down at his hand, before looking up and holding his gaze. “You’re not angry right now, are you?”

Harry had to stop and think about it, given how out-of-the-blue the query was. “No, I suppose not,” he admitted. “Then, I don’t really think I am normally, either.”

Ginny smiled again, though it was much smaller than the prior ones. She took her hand back and then stood up. “All the same, I’ll think about the broom issue. I really do appreciate this morning, Harry.”

Harry shrugged and stood up himself, dispelling the chair with a silent Finite! before stretching out his frozen muscles and joints. “I’m hungry, and it’s time for breakfast. Shall we?”

“What about the chocolate? You’re not seriously going to leave it here, are you?”

“Well,” Harry said in a playful frown, “I don’t want to bother with carrying it around, so I’d thought the birds might like to try it. I suppose you could just keep the box for me, unless you don’t want to monkey with it either?”

He was still in mid-sentence when she pounced on the box, shrank it down, and scooped it into her pocket. She gave him a bright, cheery smile, and asked, "What box?"

Laughing, Harry simply shrugged and pointed in the direction of the castle. "Breakfast?" Without waiting for a reply, Harry leapt onto Sirius' broom and shot toward the low valley pass between the hills. He was certain he could fly low, around the hills, faster than he could fly over the tops of them. Just as the broom really picked up the speed and the wind pressure became rather intense, he heard a whoop and Ginny shot past him. She was crouched down low over the broom, her red hair streaming behind her with the plait barely holding form. From then on she easily led the way back to the castle. By the time he hopped off his broom, she was leaning against the doors, inspecting her fingernails.

"A bit slow today, aren't you, Potter?"

"Yeah, yeah," Harry muttered. "Have pity on a bloke that flies brooms but rarely, would you?"

"Pity? You? Ha!" Her short bark of laughter was followed by a mimicry of his own string of commentary when he was pushing her to train harder. She had the tone about right, but her voice would never match his. Her mini-tirade was cut short, though, when the castle doors opened.

"Good morning Miss Weasley, Mr Potter," Albus Dumbledore said as he joined them by moving onto the front steps. "I rather thought I might find you out here at this hour."

Ginny seemed a bit embarrassed and uncertain at being caught outside before breakfast by the headmaster, but Harry merely snorted slightly. The headmaster had known exactly where they were all along, for Harry had left a 'note' with Rocky the previous night regarding his intentions and plans for the morning. He was unsure that taking Ginny out of the castle required it but thought it prudent to at least try to build a higher trust level between the man and himself.

“If you don’t mind, Miss Weasley, I’d like to speak to Mr Potter for a moment. I do believe the elves have already laid out breakfast if you’re hungry. I promise not to keep him more than a few minutes.”

Ginny nodded quickly, clearly recognising the ‘request’ for what it was, and held up Harry’s broom in silent query. Harry shook his head and waved her on, to which he received an echo of her possessive grin before she scurried inside. Harry all but jumped out of his skin when the crack! of Apparition occurred next to him. Within a heartbeat, Cyril was half-kneeling on the ground, a glowing shield having barely deflected Harry’s Stunner into the grass. The large burned area was mute testimony to how Harry reacted to unanticipated dangerous settings.

“Hmm, yes, I believe that is something I warned him about,” Dumbledore said quietly. “He was certain he could stop you before you could get your first spell off.”

“Does everyone bet on my life around here?” Harry asked with some annoyance, putting his wand away as Cyril stood up slowly. “It seems like everything I do is subject to speculation and the laying of odds.”

“It passes the time, Harry,” Albus quipped. Harry did a double-take, surprised at the blatant humour coming from the man, and stopped staring only when Cyril coughed a couple of times.

“You’ve been idle for some time now, Harry,” Cyril said with far more calm than Harry’s instant adrenaline high would agree with. “I wanted to test your reflexes. I’m glad that was a spell to disable, not kill.”

While Harry wanted to snap and snarl at his Mentor, instead he exhaled slowly and tried to study the two people in front of him. Dumbledore appeared older in some ineffable way, much as he had since the Gaunt House event. While at present there was a twinkle to his eyes and his humour seemed intact, there was a faint sensation of façade and deliberate presentation rather than genuine feeling. Cyril, too, appeared nothing so much as exhausted to the limits of

endurance. Harry knew from his last discussion with Dumbledore that both had been spending their free time trying to prepare for the inevitable conflict coming; seeing the first-hand evidence of the cost on such powerful and experienced wizards was humbling. Harry spent his own time annoying others, cleaning the castle, and trying to work through concepts that Dumbledore somehow managed to find the time to explain.

“All right,” Harry agreed with as neutral a tone as he could manage under the combination of fight response and mental recognition of reality. “Assuming I passed the test, may I inquire as to what brings the two of you to track me down this morning?”

“Let’s walk,” Cyril said, by way of answer, and began walking toward the Quidditch pitch.

Harry fell in step with his Mentor, and Dumbledore joined them on Harry’s other side. Under other conditions, Harry would be concerned for the development of being stuck between the two, but given their clear fatigue, he was not overly concerned.

Dumbledore waved his wand about briefly before stowing it in his sleeve. “We may now talk freely. Harry, Cyril and I have come across some information, but the source of the information presents a problem. We wish to discuss the issue with you.”

“I get the immediate impression I’m really not going to like this,” Harry observed while raising his eyes to the sky. It held the promise of being a gloriously boring, grey day, and that was undoubtedly going to be more comfort than what he heard next.

“What is your root problem with Severus Snape?” Cyril asked point blank.

“Other than the fact the man’s an abusive prick?” Harry asked, keeping his eyes on the sky. He would not let his emotions come out uncontrolled on this topic. “Other than he ignores proper behaviour, such as when he rapes the minds of children? How about how he encourages wanton brutality among ‘his’ Slytherins? The fact that he

can't teach? That he tries to spy on every conversation, regardless of a lack of invitation?"

"Harry," Dumbledore said slowly, "let us be honest here. You have almost no direct experience with Severus, so at best, many of these things you state are hearsay."

Harry laughed without mirth. "Right. Tell me, Headmaster, since you keep tabs on me so closely, how is it that I've managed to get round this castle so easily? At least one person has noticed it without your extra tools for insight."

They continued on in silence for some distance before Cyril broke the slight tension. "You're saying you've spent time inside Hogwarts before this academic year began, obviously. That no one knew shows several things, but the most important is that others could do the same."

"Indeed," Dumbledore pointed out. "I have never tried to ward the castle from outsiders, for it seemed pointless. It is almost impossible to seal the campus while retaining any function as a school. Be that as it may, Harry, you did not answer the question."

Harry aimed for a tone best suited for a casual chat about the weather. "Oh?"

"I am sure those reasons seem to justify your attitude in some degree, Harry," Dumbledore offered. "I have already conceded to not paying close enough attention to the problem with the students. However, based on how you treat others, I would expect you to treat Severus with contempt or to challenge him over his acts were this all that was at stake. Instead, you seemed to almost hate him from the instant you met and, even now, clearly wish him harm."

Harry knew he was not going to get out of answering their question on some tangible level, efforts at misdirection aside. With a sigh, he brought his eyes back to the horizon and decided to turn the tables on the inquisitors. It would be easier than dwelling on why he felt

what he did. "Headmaster, you previously said you trust Snape completely. Will you still state the same?"

That a moment of hesitation was extant said everything as far as Harry was concerned, regardless of what words came. "I still trust him, yes," Dumbledore stated. "I admit to more caution in looking for alternate explanations for his information, however, and try to be sure I have as complete a picture as I may."

"That's another way of saying 'no', I believe," Harry offered without pleasure. The breaking of trust was never a pleasant topic for him, but why the headmaster had any lingering feelings for such with Snape was beyond him.

"In the strictest sense, I will accept that," Dumbledore said. They were entering the empty Quidditch pitch, and the three of them began to walk toward the centre of the field.

"Did Snape ever justify the issue with his Dark Mark?" Harry asked, switching the line of reasoning. He needed to be sure the inconsistencies were fully evident so that even a casual observer would have to sit up and pay attention. "That he failed to disclose its change to you?"

"Yes," Dumbledore replied immediately. "I had a long conversation with him regarding that topic, and I am satisfied with his answers. You are still not answering my question, however."

"Please follow along for a moment, I'll get there in the end." Harry waited until both Cyril and Dumbledore nodded their acquiescence to the request. "Next question. Do you both know the specifics of the Rite of Rebirth as well as the Golem Ritual?"

Cyril's "no" was spoken at the same time as Dumbledore's "yes," which caused the two older men to exchange surprised looks before they both turned to Harry. "I would like to know how you know, Harry," Cyril said sharply. "I know only the general history and should think that particular knowledge would be better left lost."

“Nicolas found a text,” Dumbledore answered before Harry could. “He sent me a summary of the rituals, with the requirements laid out. He asked that I keep my eyes open for indicators of . . . movement, shall we say, that either was being planned or executed.”

“And he shared this text with you, Harry? Or just the summary?” Cyril’s question made it clear that no deviation from strict truth would be tolerated.

“I have the text in my library, actually,” Harry replied. “I’ve had it for years.” Both men stared at Harry, surprise and more evident on their faces. Harry waved them off before they could digress into a rat-hole of debate. “It’s safely secured. But that’s not the point. Since you’re aware of the details, Headmaster, I have one very specific question for you. Would you please name all the people who have the skill, the history, and the connections to make either of the potion bases required? It takes months of preparation, specialised ingredients, and a certain gift for potions. I wouldn’t even be willing to risk an attempt due to what would happen if it wasn’t handled properly at all times.”

No one spoke again, even when their little group reached the centre of the pitch and stood in a loose circle facing each other. Cyril was watching Dumbledore very closely, and Harry wondered at what the man was doing. Harry had all but spelled out what Wormtail muttered before Riddle’s reincarnation ritual began, but it was up to the headmaster to admit that the answer that was self-evident.

“I see two problems,” Dumbledore said finally. “First, it is clear that Tom did not use either of those rituals for his reincarnation. Second, there are people outside of Britain that have the skill and would be willing to make anything for the right price.”

“Everyone has a price,” Harry agreed readily, “especially people like Snape. You know what Ockham’s Razor indicates just as well as I do, though I have one extra bit of information. Wormtail was whinging about Snape leaving him to finish the potion by himself, which makes it clear that Snape made the potion for Riddle. While I wouldn’t normally trust his word, at the time I was recovering from the Cruciatus. He expected me to be dead within moments, so he had no



real reason to shield the truth.” Harry tried to focus on his breathing and not remember the day or events at hand. It was still raw in many respects, and he could feel his pulse quicken slightly as he battled for control over his anger.

“He identified Severus by name? That was not in the memory you shared with me.”

“It was before the ritual was used. If you want to see that, I’ll provide the memory.” Harry turned again to look at the sky and tried to think about flying. Chasing Hedwig around, or zipping about on a broomstick solo, both were good thoughts and far from the events of the recent summer. “But yes, he said Severus by name, unless you know of another with the same name, inclinations, prior history, and sufficient skill.”

“I see.” Dumbledore turned his gaze toward the stands and absently stroked his beard while staring into space. Cyril faced Harry and raised one eyebrow. Harry thought he was asking if his personal certainty was sufficient to warrant a removal of doubt, to which Harry simply nodded his acceptance. He was still focusing on clouds and the feeling of the wind on his body when the headmaster’s voice interrupted him. “What about the ritual used?”

“When we first analysed those rituals, Nicolas and Remus both agreed that they were formulaic patterns of existing magics. Anyone sufficiently skilled could modify them or even substitute other magic to the templates,” Harry offered, trying to keep the memories that were crowding closer at bay. He did not want to think about those times now; he wanted to remain calm and rational. “At the time, it made no sense to me. Today, I can see what they were saying, but I wouldn’t dream of trying to make any changes. It’s far beyond my level.”

“Yes,” Dumbledore said faintly. “I can imagine as much, though I daresay it would be clearer if I were to read the material in question. He was able to do the rebirth but borrowed from the golem pattern to skip the period of maturation. He was reborn an adult.”

“That’s what we understand happened, yes,” Harry said. Clouds, brooms, birds, flying through the rain. Memories of happier discoveries and adventure, they were a buffer from the raw feelings the conversation was raising. “And given that Snape was instrumental in all of that, just how d’you think I’ll feel about the bastard? Or how much trust I’ll extend to him? I can’t blame him for what happened to Nicolas in full, but if he’d been working for you in truth, you’d have known all of this, and we never would’ve fallen into that trap.”

“You must admit, the evidence is circumstantial at this point,” Dumbledore said most cautiously.

Harry had to applaud the man internally for his care, as it had to be apparent that the topic of Severus Snape around Harry Potter would always be one of a minefield. “Let me be clear, then, and answer your original question. If you weren’t adamant that he has value, I’d just as soon see him dead. Should I ever get real proof he was involved beyond the mutterings of a coward, trust me, you’ll never see or hear from him again, his supposed value notwithstanding. And that does follow part of my instructions from Vencil, for the record.”

“Thank you for making it clear, Harry,” Cyril said. “Why don’t you get some breakfast now, while we re-evaluate things.”

Recognising the command for what it was, Harry was all too happy to leave the duo behind. They could argue back and forth until they were blue in the face, but as far as Harry was concerned, Snape’s value in life had expired years ago. It was only a matter of time before Snape made a mistake and let slip evidence, at which point Harry and his allies would conduct their standard sweep and collect everything there was to be collected. Not even a mouse would be left behind.

The walk back to the castle was time for him to sink into the meditation on his breathing, letting the calm back in and pushing the anger down. Life had nothing to do with fairness, and he would not expect anything from it he could not secure with his own hands. His future, his family’s future, was within his hands to shape and focus.

He had to keep control as he could afford no more mistakes. Too many people died when he made mistakes.

Walking into the Great Hall, he saw Ginny sitting by herself at the farthest end of the Gryffindor table from where he was standing. Exhaling to keep his rhythm of calm, Harry headed down the aisle to sit across from her. He paused briefly, however, when he saw Hermione frowning at him.

“I hear congratulations are in order, Hermione,” he said as pleasantly as he could manage. “You made a breakthrough with your understanding of magic.”

She said nothing for a moment before giving him a curt nod.

“For what it’s worth,” Harry began, careful to enunciate each word, “I’m sorry for the chaos the other night.”

“Pride, Harry Potter, goes before the fall.”

Her gaze told him clearly that he was not forgiven for past acts, let alone the damage from the Transfiguration experiment, so he did the only thing he could: he nodded his acceptance and moved on. When he reached the last seat, he sank into it and gave a wry smile to Ginny.

“It’s a start, Harry,” was all she said as she continued to butter her toast.

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Tue, 26 Sep 1995

There was a sensation just there, on the edge of consciousness, as Harry woke abruptly. It was altogether unpleasant in form and function, and he raised one hand to wearily scratch at the back of an ear. Trying to grasp exactly why he was awake before his alarm, he faintly understood that scratching his ear had been a form of intense relief. But that only made him more cognizant of the intense

sensation of ancillary itches about his body and how raw he felt everywhere, as though he had been furiously scratching in his sleep. Within moments, he was frantically scratching all over, luxuriating in the fierce pleasure and wondering how anyone could become so itchy so quickly.

That trailing thought brought his mental gears into play, and he realised he had been had. Something was definitely abnormal about the situation. He knew he had crawled into bed early, just after nine with the common room still packed full of people, and a quick glance at Dean's phosphorescent analogue clock hands showed him he had been asleep not even twenty minutes. Throwing off his blankets, Harry rose and studied the bed closely, fighting the urge to scratch himself bloody. He could find nothing out of the ordinary, for there was not a trace of magic on the bed anywhere other than the ambient environment.

Doing his best to minimise wiggling and scratching himself raw, since he clearly could not stop, Harry drew a wand and illuminated the surface of the sheets. Looking as closely as he could, he saw faint silvery hairs bunched in spots where he had obviously moved about while sleeping – or scratching. His bed was coated in them, and since he had fallen asleep in just boxers and pyjama bottoms, it was no wonder he was scratching like mad.

The twins had clearly changed tactics, and moved from magical to Muggle delivery methods. Annoyed at having been caught out, Harry pulled one of his wands from under the pillow and used Scourgify vigorously over his body, the sheets, and everything else he could see. Thankful for the incessant feeling of itchy-itchy-itchy to finally begin abating, Harry tried to decide on a course of action. Payback, of course, was essential. The question remained as to how he could verify the twins were the actual culprits.

They tended not to be overly subtle with their eyes when they were up to something, so the best bet would be to return to the common room and pay attention to who was watching him more than usual. It was almost certain the twins would be behind it, but there was a slight chance that Ginny – feeling a bit more normal since The Distraction – had staged a bit of her payback plans.

Swapping his pyjamas for some clean clothing, Harry rapidly descended the stairs to begin an effort at watching the watchers.

Or rather, until he reached the last step, at which point he tripped over something and shot his hands out to catch himself. In the process of his hands hitting the ground, he felt something give way underneath his palms, and he was promptly doused in a thick, sticky substance. As he looked up toward a common room full of people watching him with open grins and money coming out of pockets, a cloud of white material that smelled – and tasted – like flour followed the sticky soup he had previously been doused with.

“All right there, Harry?” George asked around his laughter.

“Looking like you’ve seen a ghost, old chap!” Fred called while taking money from several people.

Somehow, Harry knew that Hermione was behind the switch to Muggle tactics. He just needed to prove it. But her triumphant grin was sufficient evidence for now. The stakes had been raised.

A/N:

The description of what Death Eaters did to pregnant Muggle women is not mine to claim as fully original. It is very close to what actually happened to at least some of the forced “comfort women” who became pregnant during the Japanese occupation of China (and other areas). Rather horrific, isn’t it?

Thanks as always to the beta team . . .

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